

A Time to Love

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A Time to Love

by [Mizuni_no_neko](#)

Summary

Detective Alfred Jones and Detective Ivan Braginsky have been partners for years, and for years their constant fighting has been a bane on their department. But when the gang crime unit requests them for a special undercover assignment, they'll have to put aside their differences and act like the perfect, happy couple to get close to Kiku Honda, the leader of the Rising Sun, and take down his operation. But between their own fighting, enemies that seem to know too much, and something brewing in the city's underworld, can they learn to get along...or even something more?

Chapter 1

Alfred Jones came back to the station the same way he usually did after working the beat with one Ivan Braginsky: covered in bruises and cuts. To be fair to the Russian man, the lacerations and contusions weren't completely his fault this time. They'd gotten a call near the end of their shift about a domestic disturbance on Maple Street, a surprisingly bad area given the cheery sounding name. Apparently the neighbors had heard yelling, followed by screaming, and then an eerie silence that had worried the old gal enough for her to call them out. They'd rushed over, both silently praying that one or both of the participants wasn't dead or severely injured.

They'd arrived on the scene to see the door ajar, the apartment trashed, and a young woman lying limp on the floor. They feared the worst, and why shouldn't they? It seemed as if they'd been too late. But suddenly the girl stirred slightly. Ivan checked her breathing and other vitals and found, thankfully, that she was merely unconscious and not dead as they'd feared.

While Ivan called for backup and an ambulance, Alfred had searched the apartment, gun drawn and eyes blazing with righteous fury. He despised wife-beaters more than any other criminals, except for maybe pedophiles. Both types of bad guys preyed on those weaker than them. They were cowardly and it was about time they picked on someone their own size. Namely him.

He'd arrived at the window over the fire escape just in time to see the perp, a young man about the girl's age, scaling down the fire escape into an alley. He'd immediately chased after him, practically tearing down the ladder and taking off after the man. He swung like an ape down the fire escape, nimble and seemingly at home in this urban jungle.

It hadn't been a long chase. The man was wounded from the fight, apparently the girl had a knife tucked away somewhere on her person in case he decided to do exactly what he did. She'd stabbed him in the leg before he knocked her unconscious and escaped. Alfred took him down, tackling him to the ground and attempting to subdue him.

But, though his foe was wounded, he was not going to go down without a fight. A scuffle broke out. The perp threw a punch, catching Alfred square in the jaw. A swift knee to the man's stomach winded him, but he got in another punch to Alfred's chest. By the time the backup cars arrived, he'd managed to cuff the still struggling man and get him into the back of the squad car as the girl was being loaded into the ambulance.

Ivan had merely taken in his battered appearance and smirked, remarking, "You could not even take down a wounded man? You must be letting yourself go, Jones." It had been progress, at least, from their usual routine of beating the crap out of each other when no one was around to get onto them about it or ask questions later. In fact, it was about as close to a compliment as he was likely to get from him. Not that he particularly wanted the asshole's compliments.

"Jones, what the hell happened to you?" Came a voice from across the locker room. It was the squad commander, Arthur Kirkland. He'd known the commander for a long time, they had a lot of history together. But it wasn't as if the older of the two men had any problem with taking Alfred down a peg. In fact, as his half-brother it was kind of his job.

"It'll all in my report, commander." He said cheerfully, loosening his tie and opening the door to his locker. Arthur merely huffed and glared at him. As much as he loved the little wanker, Alfred could be quite infuriating at times. But family was family, and there was nothing to be done.

"So it wasn't Braginsky this time?" He asked, eyes narrowing suspiciously. If he'd been lying, Alfred might have been nervous. Arthur was probably the best at telling when a person was lying in the whole department. He could pick out a tell from a hundred meters off. It made him quite the formidable opponent in poker. He was especially adept at reading Alfred and their two other brothers, Francis and Matthew. (Their dad got around.) He was like a human lie detector.

"Nope, this was all legit. The fucking commie didn't even get a punch in." He said proudly. His chest puffed up and for a moment, Arthur was reminded of a young boy bragging to his friends on the playground.

"So I am to assume that you got one in on him?" He asked, eyes narrowing further and tone icy. He was in no mood to put up with his little brother's shenanigans. It had been a long day and it promised to drag on even further.

"Nope, but I landed a few on the perp. But that'll be in my report too, sir." He teased, grinning like a school boy, a motif that reoccurred often when one was talking about Detective Jones. Arthur sighed and shook his head, wondering (not for the first or last time) why his brother had to be such an idiot.

"For Christ's sake, Alfred. Do try to be more careful. You've already been on probation twice for fighting with Braginsky. And for the last time, he's not a communist." At this point Arthur was mentally cursing his family all to hell. A bunch of idiots, the lot of them! Sometimes he wondered if his life would have been better if he was an only child, or if the other boys had just stayed with their mothers.

Their father, the Chief of Police, had been a notorious play boy back when he was a detective. In the span of only 7 years he'd fathered four sons by four different women. It had been quite the scandal at the time, what with none of the boys being born in wedlock but Alfred (who was their Dad's favorite, but no one really minded because it was more of a curse than a blessing.)

First there had been Marguerite, a wannabe French actress who had a fling with their father and become pregnant. She had been furious, insisting that Sam had ruined her career with this child. The young detective had wanted her to stay at least long enough to have the baby and leave it in his care, knowing that she didn't want it. But Marguerite had been young and rash and had fled back to France while still pregnant.

Two years later Sam met a beautiful, unhappily married novelist from England and they'd begun a whirlwind romance while she was staying in the city trying to come up with ideas for her novels. She had been stuck in a dead end marriage with a man she didn't love, but Sam made her feel young and alive again. That is, until she became pregnant. Her marriage had been destroyed, but she couldn't bring herself to be overly mournful. The pair had agreed mutually that it was for the best that they part ways and Emily go back to England with the child.

Three years passed by and Sam met another wonderful young woman, a comic book artist named Patience. This time it wasn't just a fling. Sam fell completely head over heels for her and this time he was determined to make it work out. So Sam proposed and they were married on a crisp, clear fall day. Their son Alfred, who Patience called their little blessing, was born the following July. But the birth had been hard and Patience had been very sick through the last trimester. Before the young family even had a chance to grow together, she was taken away.

Sam never thought he'd love again, and in a way he was right. He never felt for another woman the way he had for Patience. But there was a Canadian diplomat, a quiet woman by the name of Mary who was kind and gentle and didn't ask too much of Sam, who managed to stumble into his life. She moved in with him and helped him take care of his now one year old son.

It wasn't long until the stork visited again, this time bringing a healthy baby boy who the couple named Matthew. But something seemed off about Mary in the days after the birth. Sam was afraid she would go the way his wife had. But it had turned out to be even worse. For three days after Matthew was born, his mother abandoned him, his father, and his brother.

Alfred and Matthew didn't even know that they had older brothers until they were 5 and 3. Sam had never really considered telling them about brothers they might never even meet. But fate is a fickle mistress and one by one the boys came inevitably back to their father.

First Francis' mother had dumped him on their father, telling him in no uncertain terms that she didn't want to raise his brat anymore. The 10 year old had begged his mother not to leave him with the strange man in a country where he didn't speak the language, but she'd just left without a backwards glance. Despite the traumatizing nature of his abandonment, Francis took to his father. More importantly, he turned out to be the perfect babysitter for his younger brothers while Sam occupied himself with his job to keep his own pain at bay and food on the table for his boys.

Arthur's mother had been a bit more kind. She truly loved her son, but was very poor and couldn't support him. She brought him to his father so that he could have everything he needed and a better chance in America. Arthur took the separation hard and became sarcastic and shut off from his emotions.

But he adored his brothers, even Francis; though he'd never admit it. Still, he missed his mother. They all did. But at least Emily would come to visit when she could manage it. To this day she still sometimes visited when she could and was the closest thing to a mother the other boys had.

They had their differences and their fights, but they were quite a very close-knit family when it came down to it. Being the children of a detective, they were sometimes left alone most of the day and into the night. They went through various babysitters and Arthur's mother would watch them when she was in the city, but mostly Francis took care of them. When Sam Jones got promoted to Chief of Police when the boys were 14, 12, 9, and 7 they saw even less of him. But they didn't complain much, they were used to it.

And when they were each, in turn, old enough to go to college and pick a career choice, they all invariably followed their father into the world of law enforcement. Francis had started out as a lawyer, and a pretty good one to boot. But after losing his license because of a sexual harassment suit, he turned to police dispatching. Something he loved doing (mostly because he loved the sound of his own voice). Arthur and Alfred both became cops, with Arthur making squad commander and Alfred becoming a detective. Mattie was a legal aid working his way through law school and learning the trade through watching those he worked for.

And that was why it was so hard to see his little brother struggling to get along with his partner. They were a good team, when they weren't at each other's throats. They were probably the best cops in his squad, not that he'd tell either of them that. But the group dynamic was just plain awful. To make matters worse, he'd just received a request from the gang crime unit to borrow the two of them for something. That could only turn out badly, as far as he was concerned. Once the other unit saw how horrible the two were about fighting, they would report it. And, invariably, news would reach their Father. And that was not something Arthur wanted him to find out. He would completely blow a gasket and probably fire Braginsky for messing with his son.

"Whatever, forget I said anything. Just..." He sighed and shook his head again, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Just get dressed, get Braginsky, and get in my office. I have an assignment for you." He said, waving over his shoulder as he exited the locker room. "And don't get into any trouble between here and my office, alright!?"

Alfred nodded enthusiastically, even though Arthur couldn't see the gesture. A new assignment! He and Braginsky hadn't had a new assignment since they'd managed to almost botch the last one fighting! And now they were getting another chance after months of working the beat! He wondered what it was! Their department mostly handled domestic abuse and sex crimes, so what could it possibly be that Arthur wouldn't have told him right then or over their weekly family dinners? It must be something fucking epic!

He hurried to dress, practically tearing at his clothes in giddy excitement before bolting out of the locker room to find Braginsky and tell him the great news.

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Ivan Braginsky crossed his legs and leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers and waiting for their commander to speak while his partner fidgeted excitedly beside him. The boy was so infuriatingly hyper all the time and sometimes it was all he could do not to reach over and grab him by his hair until he stopped his restless movement. But now was not the time, especially not considering the rather interesting coincidence of the two being both brothers and the sons of his boss.

So he waited semi-patiently while watching the commander pace back and forth as if he had a hard decision to make within the next few minutes. If he was this worried then it must be something potentially dangerous. He would not delude himself into thinking the worry was for him, but there were definitely advantages to being partnered with the man's brother.

At long length the British man turned to them, eyes hard and resolute. Whatever decision he had to make, he'd finally come to it and it was evident by his entire body language that he would stand by it no matter what the consequences or how much they protested. Which means that it was something to protest. So the assignment was both potentially dangerous and something they would not want to do. This only piqued his interest, and he leaned in to better hear what he was about to say.

"You two are familiar with the recent gang activity in the downtown area by a street gang that calls themselves The Rising Sun?" He asked, leafing non-chalantly through a file of papers, presumably related to the case they were being assigned.

"Yeah, they're the new Asian gang, right? The ones who are selling weapons and heroin?" Alfred answered first.

"Yes. But they also dabble in kidnapping, fraud, and sex slave trafficking. Their leader, Kiku Honda, has recently hired an elusive duo of mercenaries to take out his main competition, Yao Wang of the Red Dragon gang. However, before they could go to meet their employer, they made a rookie mistake and were caught with illegal arms coming through the airport. They assure us that Honda has never seen them or their pictures and has no clue what they look like or how they act." Arthur explained, still thumbing through the papers. Ivan nodded and thought for a moment.

"So this is where we come in? We are to go undercover as these mercenaries and infiltrate the gang to gather information?" He asked, for clarification.

"Yes. You are to collect information over a period of months that has yet to be determined, completely immersing yourself in this world. You are to wait for any orders to do anything and you are to act the parts perfectly. Anything we say, you do. And you will report back as soon as it is safe after finding out anything of import. Do I make myself clear?" He paused and pinned them with a stern look until they both nodded. "Good. Also, if you happen to find yourself in a situation where taking out Yao Wang of the Red Dragon is unavoidable, the government will deem your actions necessary and will not take action." He said with a meaningful look at the both of them. You are to take him out as soon as you get the chance.

"Sounds easy enough." Alfred quipped. But he knew Arthur was hiding something that he didn't want to tell them, it was obvious in the tense way he stood. "So what's the catch?"

"The catch, Detective Jones, is that the two mercenaries are infamous lovers." He said, staring straight at them and daring them to speak out.

They both sat there for long moments, shell shocked and slack-jawed. Lovers? They, the two cops most notorious for hating each other, had to go undercover as lovers!? It was just unreal! It literally couldn't be happening. And yet, looking at the completely serious face of their boss, they could see that it most certainly was and there was little to nothing they could do about it.

Alfred was the first to snap, jumping up out of the chair as if it had burned him. Ivan stayed seated, glowering at Arthur like he'd just told him he'd killed his entire family and was coming back for him.

"Fuck no! I am not pretending to be that Commie's lovebunny! He's probably a fucking pervet who'd molest me in my sleep!" He growled, turning his accusing glare on the Russian, who took the chance to infuriate the blonde more by letting his eyes rove up and down his form in a mockery of an approving leer.

"See what I mean!? Ugh! Fucking pervert Russian!" He screeched, diving for Ivan. He was stopped short by Arthur's hand fisting into the back of his jacket and yanking him back.

"Detective Jones, you are going on this assignment and that is that. The Gang Crime unit specifically requested the two of you and you are not going to screw this up. Do you really want the Chief to find out?" Alfred grew quiet and relaxed in Arthur's hold at the mention of their father. Fuck, that wasn't good. Dad was already on his case about the bruises and cuts he came home with every once in awhile to family dinners. If he found out that he was letting the fighting with his partner get in the way of him doing his job, son or not, he would be off the force.

"Fine, whatever. But only if Braginsky keeps his goddamned hands to himself!" He growled.

"He will do no such thing. You two are to act as if you're hopelessly in love with each other until either your cover is blown or you are retrieved from your positions. Do I make myself clear?" He growled, fixing him with a glare. Alfred glared back a moment before giving a grudging nod. Arthur turned his glare to Ivan who, as much as he hated the situation, nodded as well.

"You will spend the next few hours going over everything you need to know before we insert you into your positions. Then you will be sent home to pack and get a good night's rest before being sent to the rendez-vous point with Honda's grunts. You will not wear wires, you will be issued non-police handguns, and you will act as you are required to. You are dismissed." He said, waving them out of the office with no room for any more discussion on the matter.

They backed out of the office, knowing not to mess with the Captain when he was in one of his moods. But this wasn't just something they could let slide! Not, at least, without a few barbed words exchanged.

"I know you're totally going to get off on making me uncomfortable. So, for the sake of me not ripping your dick off, don't fucking touch me you freak." Alfred snarled, lip curling up in a sneer.

"As if I would want to touch you, whore. Who knows what kinds of diseases you carry? I do not even know if you have had your rabies shot." Ivan replied back with an easy smirk that infuriated Alfred all the more.

"Hey, at least I get some every once in awhile. When's the last time you got laid?" Alfred sneered. "As uptight as you are, it's gotta have been awhile."

“Perhaps you should ask Matvey.” Ivan sing-songed, knowing that even if it wasn’t true that it would get under his partner’s skin. There was nothing the blonde detective loved in this world more than his family.

“Mattie wouldn’t touch your nasty commie ass with a ten foot pole and you know it.” The other growled, his hands balling into fists. It took all he had not to deck his partner in the face right then and there.

“Perhaps you are right. But then again, it would be bad etiquette for him to pursue his brother’s lover.” The Russian man was more than slightly disgusted with himself for mentioning that particular part of their assignment, but it had to be done to get Alfred’s goat.

“Let’s get one thing straight, buster. You’re nothing to me. You’re hardly even my fucking partner and if I thought for a second the Chief would let me switch and pawn you off on someone else, I would in an instant.” Alfred growled, turning on his heel and storming off to gather his things and go home.

Ivan watched him go with something between accomplishment and a vague disappointment. He chose to ignore the latter and set off himself. He had to deliver the bad news to his sisters.

Chapter 2

Alfred trudged into his apartment looking like hell warmed over. He'd spent the last four hours learning the ins and outs of acting like the mercenary he was conscripted to play. Details and facts ran through his mind like unwanted word vomit for his brain and every time he closed his eyes he saw the pictures of various missions and assassinations he was supposed to have performed. Gruesome and grisly sights, things he never wanted to see. Not that it was that different than any other case he'd ever had in his years on the force. But every case got to him like this. And he was glad, too. It meant he was still human.

His stomach was still churning from the photos and his head was spinning from all the new information. If there was one thing he didn't want to go through right now, it was dinner with his family. Family dinners were loud and exhausting, especially when he had to cook it all beforehand. He couldn't even imagine the epic levels of tired he was going to reach when he had to be up early tomorrow to meet Ivan for their assignment.

Of course, there was no escaping family dinner when it was at your house and the woman who'd basically been your mother since you can remember finally has a chance to visit. There was the real kicker, there. Emily was coming to visit, so there was absolutely positively no way he could ever bail. There wasn't anything on this earth he wouldn't do for Emily Kirkland if she asked, and that included forgoing much needed and wanted rest to spend time with her and the other boys while she was in the City. So he hung up his coat on the peg in the hallway and made his way to the kitchen for some well-deserved coffee.

Only, when he got in there, he wasn't as alone as he'd expected. He barely kept himself from jumping out of his skin as Emily turned around and gave him a short wave before going back to stirring a pot of pasta boiling on the stove. She had her blonde hair pulled back in a messy bun, and she was wearing a flannel work shirt that completely swamped her petite frame. It looked artsy and rustic on her and Alfred liked to think it was something his own mother would have worn. Of course, Patience Jones probably would have looked more tomboyish than rustic, but it still made him feel like he wasn't missing the most important female figure in his life. Kind of a sad thought, but Emily was great.

"Emily, what the hell are you doing here? Dinner isn't for another hour and you scared the shit outta me!" He complained, trying not to pout. It was an uphill battle that he lost fast. He was no match for the pout, he was its bitch.

"Al, sweetheart, you may be an adult but please watch your language." She said, smiling sweetly and ignoring the question. It wasn't unusual for her to do that, mostly because she was used to Alfred constantly asking questions about everything. As a child his favorite words had been who, what, when, where, why, and how. With his brothers just unable or unwilling to answer his questions and his father being gone most of the time, the job of fielding and answering all of those questions had fallen mostly to Emily.

"Emily! You didn't answer the question!" He whined, heading over to the fridge to see what he could help with. It was common knowledge in the family that if Emily showed up early on

family dinner night, you probably wouldn't do any of the cooking yourself. Not that it was a bad thing, Emily was awesome at mom stuff like cooking and band aids and stuff. And it certainly helped when it was Arthur's turn to cook. He was a great police chief and all, but a sous chef he definitely was not. He may be Emily's biological son, but he inherited none of her nurturing nature or cooking ability.

"That's because you already know why I'm here, dear." She laughed, ruffling his hair as she passed. "Now set the table and get a salad ready, will you? I just have to cover the sauce and put the bread sticks in the oven and then we'll have some time to catch up before the rest of the boys get here. Is your father coming to dinner?" She asked, rummaging through the cupboards for a cover for the saucepan.

"No, dad's got something going on tonight. I'm pretty sure it has something to do with work, though. He usually only misses family dinner to see one of his call girls when he really really likes her or one of us has made him mad. He's kinda lukewarm about this...Daisy chick and last time I checked none of us had been too out of line. So he's probably catching up on paperwork or something." He joked. Sam's womanizing ways were somewhat of a running joke within the family and their closest circle of friends.

Emily laughed again, grabbing a lid and fitting it over the rim of the saucepan and turning the heat down. "Yes, your father does have a penchant for letting amorous affairs get in the way of common sense." She shook her head rather affectionately as she slid the bread sticks into the oven. One may wonder why Emily, Sam's former lover, was taking the talk of his exploits so well. Well it was simple, Emily and Sam had somehow over the years gone from lovers to something more akin to best friends.

She and Sam had broken it off well before Arthur had been born and he had been the main cause of her divorce, but she often thanked him for that. After her divorce and sending her son to live with his father, she had more time to work on her writing. She was now a best-selling novelist and she and Sam got along much like two old college friends, citing him as the reason for her success. She often joked that if he hadn't ruined her life, she wouldn't have one.

Alfred snatched two sodas out of the fridge and tossed one to Emily, who caught it out of the air like a ninja. The woman had some seriously leet skills. When Alfred was a kid he'd been convinced that she was a ninja and had convinced Matthew as well. Francis and Arthur had played along because they thought it was funny and Emily herself never said anything to the contrary. Their father, on the other hand, was less than thrilled with their game and had told them in no uncertain terms that Emily wasn't, in fact, a ninja. She had countered by coming in the door and catching his coat just as it fell and winking at Alfred behind his father's back, pressing a finger to her lips in a 'shhh' motion. Somewhere in the back of his mind, even as an adult, he still wanted to believe she was a ninja.

"So what brings you to Metropolis this time, Em?" He asked, making his way to the living room and dive-bombing onto the couch. Emily followed after and sat, much less dramatically, in a chair across from him while they waited for the food to cook. They both popped the tab on their sodas and sat in silence while Emily took a sip and composed her reply. She looked like it was something she didn't really want to talk about, but Alfred knew

from the look on her face that this was one of those times when she would indulge him and answer the question. He just prayed it wasn't something as horrendous as the news he'd gotten earlier about his mission with Braginsky.

"I'm...looking for Matthew's mother." She finally said after a long pause, immediately picking up her soda again to give her time before Alfred started asking questions. Either it worked, or Alfred was too shocked to really think of anything other than the fact that Emily was actively pursuing a woman who had abandoned his younger brother only days after giving birth to him. They hadn't seen hide or hair of her since then and any searches for information always left them as empty handed as when they'd started. Eventually they stopped looking, to spare Mattie's feelings.

"But...why?" He finally asked, voice small and quiet. He didn't want to think about Stephanie Williams or what she did. He didn't want to think about those half-remembered images of a soft voice and warm hands wiping away his tears. Until he was two, Stephanie had been the only mother he'd ever known. In some ways, her disappearance had hurt him more than Mattie. Because, unlike Mattie, he could at least remember something about her. And he sure as hell remembered all those nights staying up with Mattie way after bedtime because Dad was gone and Arthur and Francis hadn't come home from parties yet, telling Mattie everything he knew about her over and over again because the younger boy never got tired of hearing about his mom. He'd been so sure when he was little that she'd come back for the both of them, that she'd cook and clean and take care of them. He'd even been convinced that when she came back Dad would stay home more and they could be a real family. But as time wore on they grew up and realized it just wasn't happening. She wasn't coming back, she didn't want to. Mattie had given up hope first but Alfred...he had wanted so badly to have a mom again.

"Now, that, I can't tell you." She said, pressing a finger to her lips and winking. Alfred raised a skeptical eyebrow. Did Emily think he was still the naive 8 year old she had convinced that she was a secret ninja? He was a detective now, for Pete's sake, he wasn't going to fall for the "it's a secret" trick. Emily smiled sadly, something in her eyes making him wish he hadn't asked the question in the first place.

"I guess you're too old for that tired trick, aren't you, love?" She said, patting him on the head and getting up from the chair to check the food. It was a technique she's employed many times to let Alfred know that he wasn't getting any more answers from her. And, for once, he didn't think he wanted any. The look in her eyes had struck something in him. She looked so sad, like someone had told her something that was going to happen and she was powerless to stop it.

He sat there for a long time, mulling over the information in his head. He didn't say anything, didn't go after Emily. He didn't want to know anymore. He wasn't even sure he'd want to know if she found Stephanie. Did he really want to see her again after what she'd done? She'd abandoned Mattie. She'd abandoned him.

He didn't move from his spot on the couch until he heard the door open and the unmistakable tones of his oldest brother greeting their surrogate mom.

"Ah, Emily! How good to see you, ma chere!" He cried, taking her arms in his and kissing both of her cheeks. "You will sit by me tonight, non?" He laughed, placing his hands on her shoulders and steering her back into the kitchen.

"Hello, Francis dear. It's been so very long. I'd love to sit by you, you can sit on the opposite side of me from Arthur." She acquiesced, patting his hand and returning to the pasta as Francis hung his coat up and trotted into the living room to greet his little brother.

"Alfred! Mon petit soleil! How have you been? You never call big brother anymore!" He tutted, drawing up the younger man into a suffocating but well-meaning hug. "Have you forgotten me in your rise to fame? Now that you are an illustrious detective being sent on an undercover mission, have you forgotten who helped to raise you?" Francis whimpered, lip wobbling.

"Come on, Frenchy, get offa me." Alfred huffed, pushing at his brother's arms. But despite his dutifully kept appearance of weakness, his grip was like a vice. "I didn't forget you, I've just been busy. Anyway, you're here now, aren't you? Now get offa me and go...help Em with dinner or something."

"Ah, cheri, you wound me! My own little brother, my flesh and blood who I painstakingly looked after day after day, hour after hour, slaving away to make sure you had food and that your homework was always done, my own little sunshine, the light of my poor little life, does not want to consort with me! What is there in life for me to live for anymore?" He cried. Like, really. Alfred saw him actually tear up. It was more than a little embarrassing.

Luckily, right at that moment Matthew let himself in quietly, but not quietly enough to escape Francis' attention. Dropping Alfred to the floor unceremoniously, the eldest of the brothers waltzed over to the youngest and caught him up in a hug much less dramatic and suffocating than the one he'd given Alfred.

"Mathieu, so good to see you. I was wondering if you would perhaps not make it and skip out on us as you did last time." He sniffed, patting the boy's head.

"Je suis desole, frere." Matthew replied, ducking his head with a bashful and apologetic smile. Mattie was never one for many words, except when you got him really mad. And even then he shut up pretty quick if you looked at him.

"Don't give the boy a hard time, you Froggy bastard." Arthur grumbled as he trudged into the apartment, snow still sticking to his boots. Despite his appearance of grouchiness and the harsh words used, everyone knew that at this point the insults thrown between the two older of the brothers were more affectionate than anything.

"Ah, rosbif, if it isn't my favorite brother." Francis sniffed sardonically, despite the truth in those words. Francis and Arthur were about as close as Alfred and Mattie, though in completely different ways. You just had to...look a little harder for the older men's affection.

"Nice to see you too, pervert." Arthur snorted, rolling his eyes. It was so normal, so typical of their family gatherings, that Alfred almost forgot everything that had happened over the

course of this long day now made to feel considerably shorter with the company of his family.

It wasn't until later, when everyone had gone home and Alfred was all alone in his bed, that he remembered exactly how shitty tomorrow was going to be.

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Ivan wasn't in much better shape than Alfred had been by the time he finally got home. All he really wanted to do was crawl into bed and forget all about what had happened today until he inevitably had to wake up and face the music. Of course, when you lived with two sisters you could rarely simply go straight from work to bed, no matter how long or tiring your shift had been.

He was greeted at the door by his 9 year old sister Natalia, who had clung to him as soon as he came through the door. She was a needy child, she had abandonment issues tied in with their parent's deaths. She was so scared that her siblings would die too and leave her all alone that she rarely gave them breathing space while they were at home. She had been so young when Mama and Papa had died in a car crash, almost too young to remember. Sometimes Ivan wondered if they should have stayed in Russia and if it would have made any difference in Natalia's development.

"Brother! You're home!" She had cried happily, latching onto his arm and babbling away about school and homework like she usually did. He nodded and made a comment here and there where it was appropriate, but he wasn't really listening all that intently. Until Natalia mentioned that she had a new friend. His attention snapped to her and he grinned, picking up the little girl and swinging her around. She giggled and held on, face lighting up in a bright smile. Natalia hadn't made any new friends since they'd come from Russia three years ago and the doctors said that making friends at school could be a big development for her on the road to her recovery.

"And what is your new friend's name, Natasha?" He asked as he set the girl back down, patting her on the head. He was so proud of her, making friends hadn't been easy for her. What children were willing to look past her accent and where she came from didn't respond as well to her mood swings, clingy nature, and penchant for violence. If she could find a friend that was willing to look past all that, maybe she would have a chance to grow up to be a healthy adult.

"His name is Toris! He's from Lithuania. That's close to Russia, right? I couldn't find it on the map." She said, leading her brother by his hand into the kitchen where their eldest sister, Yekaterina, was making dinner. He smiled at his older sister, who smiled back and returned to watching the pot. Katyusha had stepped in a great deal for their mother after the accident: cooking, cleaning, and taking care of them. But, though she tried to keep a chipper front going for their sakes, she was prone to fits of crying. She was easily emotionally overwhelmed and even simple set backs in her daily routine could cause her to burst into tears and insist she wasn't good at anything and that she'd ruined everything. Her therapist said it was because she didn't have another outlet for her grief. But while he loved his older sister and would like nothing better than to see her get better, it wasn't the kind of environment a child like Natalia needed.

"Da, Natasha, Lithuania is near Russia. I will show it to you on the map in my office later. Would you like that?" He asked, pulling out the girl's chair for her and kissing his other sister on the cheek in greeting. "Privyet, Katusha. How was your day?" He asked, immediately setting to work, helping Katyusha with the food preparation and setting the table. He always tried to lighten his sister's work load, no matter how bad a day he'd had. He remembered one time when he had come home fresh after his first suspension for fighting with his partner to find Katyusha literally crying over spilt milk. He had immediately forgotten about the scrapes, cuts, and bruises as well as the wound to his pride and cleaned the milk up.

"It was wonderful, brother. Did you hear about little Toris?" She asked, obviously as excited about their sister's progress as he was.

"Da, I did. I would like very much to meet this boy. However, I have some bad news." He said, sitting down as Katyusha moved to put the food on the table.

"Vanya! Could it at least wait until we have eaten? You know Natalia does not eat her food after bad news. She needs her strength." Katyusha scolded lightly. Ivan nodded and kept quiet while Katyusha served them and Natalia babbled on about her new friend, eyes darting over to her brother every once in awhile like she suspected he would be leaving soon and wanted to beg him not to leave.

The meal was spent mostly conversing quietly about trivial things that wouldn't matter a few weeks from now. It was how it always was when one of them had big news. They would ignore that it was there until the meal was finished, sometimes drawing out the length of the meal to avoid talking about it. Before Ivan had broken the news that they were moving to America, they had spent almost two hours silently making every bite of food last as long as possible to delay the inevitable.

But finally they could delay the end of the meal no longer and Katyusha rose from her seat, collecting the plates and setting them in the sink so that she could do them later. Probably right after Ivan broke the news about his assignment. She tended to drown her sorrows in house work, another reason that slips ups in her chores were most likely to end in bouts of crying. Ivan sighed, knowing he had to wait for his older sister to give the green light. When she sat back down and graced him with a sad smile, he knew that it was time.

"I have been given an assignment." He said simply, staring at the wall above Natalia's head. The girls hung on his words, waiting for the details, waiting for him to break some sort of life changing or horrifying news. Was it dangerous? Was he sick? Why did he look so solemn. "I have been tasked with an undercover job. I will not be coming home perhaps for weeks. If something goes bad I could be gone for weeks." The 'or not come back at all' was, as it always had been, ignored. Neither girl wanted to think of their brother dying.

"No!" Natalia shrieked, face twisted in pain and anger. "No you can't go! You promised you wouldn't leave me! You promised!" She screamed, getting up from the table and knocking her chair over. She stormed out of the room, leaving her two older siblings to stare after her in shock. Ivan was the first to rise from his place at the dinner table, muttering something to Katyusha before running after his little sister. God dammit, he knew something like this would happen.

He found Natalia in her room, curled up on her bed sobbing. He knocked lightly on the already open door, wincing as angry eyes were turned on him. "What do you want?" She demanded, eyes already red.

"Natasha I just want to talk." He said softly, approaching the bed. Natalia eyed him warily, but didn't halt his progress. He could only hope that it meant that she was in the mood to negotiate. "Natasha, I am not leaving you. Not forever." He soothed, placing a hand on her back. She didn't scoot away from him, and he took it as a good sign. "I love you with all my heart, Natasha. You are my sister and I wish for nothing but your happiness. But I cannot always stay here with you. Remember when you first started school here in America?" He paused, allowing the girl to confirm that she remembered with a nod. "You were so scared to be away from Katyusha and I. You thought that if you left home for school that you wouldn't know if we were safe. Remember what I did?" Natalia nodded and got up off the bed, crossing the room to get a white wooden jewelry box. When she sat back down on the bed she opened it. A soft, tinkling melody drifted out as a ballerina in a blue tutu made of a small scrap of actual cloth rotated around. She rummaged around in the music box for a second before drawing out a silver chain with a small cornflower pendant. Cornflowers were both Natasha's and their late mother's favorite flower.

The pendant had been a gift from Ivan for her first school year in America. Katyusha had said she was too young for jewelry and maybe she was right, but he wanted her to have something that she could look at and remember. He had found it by chance while coming home from work one day. A local vendor had been hawking her wares on the street and the pendant had been one of the items she was selling. It was well-made, but rather cheap. He had gotten it off the woman for 10 dollars and brought it home. He had given it to her with a promise.

"You said that whenever I was scared to be alone that I should wear this necklace and Mama would be with me in spirit and that wherever you were you and Katyusha would be thinking of me and loving me." She said quietly, turning the tiny flower over in her hand. Ivan took the necklace from her and undid the clasp. He brushed her hair to the side and slipped the necklace over her neck and fastened it.

"That's right. And then you went to school and it wasn't so scary, you even said so yourself. There was never any reason to be afraid in the first place. And after awhile, you weren't scared anymore so you stopped wearing the necklace." He brushed the hair back into place, combing his fingers through it soothingly as his little sister shook. He gathered her tiny body into his lap, holding her close as she cried. "And now you will wear it again while I am gone. And Mama will be with you wherever you go. And Katyusha and I, as well. And soon I will be home and everything will be normal again and you will wonder why you were ever afraid in the first place, da?"

Natalia nodded and Ivan placed a soft kiss on the crying girl's temple, rocking her until she fell asleep.

Chapter 3

Alfred rubbed his hands together for warmth as they waited outside of an old rundown warehouse in the meat packing district. Around them, the gray darkness of the hours just before dawn crept up on them from all sides. The surrounding buildings were dingy and the shadows cast on them were long, dark, and sinister. Ivan looked unperturbed by the cold, leaning up against a wall and scouting out the area in the hope that any trouble could be seen coming.

Alfred, on the other hand, stood shivering stubbornly some five feet from his partner. They were due for a meeting with the members of The Rising Sun, but they'd been kept waiting for over an hour now in the freezing light of the early morning. They stood as far apart from each other as they could, breathing in their last moments of freedom before they were shackled together like chain gang prisoners.

For the first three minutes they'd done as they were told, standing much too close together and generally acting like a couple. They'd both drawn the line at kissing, but they'd held hands briefly. That was basically as lovey-dovey as either of them were willing to get. But as the minutes ticked by, even that became much too tedious and they broke away. They agreed silently to stand at least arms length away from each other at all times. The only problem with that was that now Alfred was freezing, his teeth chattering and his lips beginning to turn blue.

Ivan was quite enjoying watching the other suffer, but he knew that it was mean to let his 'boyfriend' freeze. So he sighed and pushed off the wall, taking pity on him and moving over to draw the American into his arms. Alfred glared up at him and opened his mouth to tell Ivan to get the fuck off him, but Ivan just shook his head and wrapped his arms around Alfred's waist. It was a surprisingly comfortable way to stand.

"Come on, Jay, I'm not gonna let you freeze for your pride." He said, looking meaningfully at where the discreet civilian car holding three fellow officers who would watch the exchange. It was their last chance to monitor the two before they left with the gang members and had no further direct contact with the police, operating only through informants and drop offs. Alfred sighed heavily and nodded, putting on a brilliant smile that almost floored Ivan. For all that he was a promiscuous, conceited, loud, annoying, imbecilic showboat, Alfred did have a beautiful smile.

"Thanks, babe." He quipped lightly, leaning into his partner and wrapping his arms around his neck. Ivan was warm, warm enough to make up for the indignity of being held by him. Slowly the shivers died down and his face got back some of its color as he pressed himself up against his 'lover'. At this point Ivan was the lesser of two evils and Alfred would gladly take advantage of their ruse to get rid of the cold. Ivan merely placed a hand on top of the shaking blonde's head and let him rest against him.

Just as Alfred was getting comfortable, three men and a woman rounded the corner. They were dressed sharply in well-tailored suits, except the woman. She wore a simple yet elegant

black dress that seemed to gather at her curves like a shadow, creating a tantalizing silhouette. Anyone looking on would think they were either business men or spies. On the second count they wouldn't have been too far off, for they were far from business men. Though they would like many people to believe so. The woman was Mei Li, Honda's right hand lady. She wore many hats within the organization: from assassin, to spy, liason to other groups, bodyguard and advisor. One of the men was Im Yong Soo, a young inventor whom not much was known about. He seemed to follow Mei Li everywhere she went, so he was thought to be something like her assistant. They were the two highest officers in the entirety of the Rising Sun, Honda didn't trust anyone half so much as he trusted them.

Alfred's eyes widened and he tried to break away from Ivan, but the larger man held him in place. Mei Li smiled at Alfred, seemingly oblivious to his discomfort. Or maybe she could see it and that's why she was smiling. Her eyes gave nothing away, seeming much older than they should, and more perceptive than he would like. He buried his face in Ivan's scarf to hide the deep blush flaming over his entire face. Ivan chuckled, and petted his hair. He was being surprisingly adorable.

"You must be Robert Delacoeur." Mei said, extending a small, dainty hand towards Ivan. That was the name of one of the assassins, who Ivan had been assigned. Robert was an ex Marine from Kansas, a formerly upstanding citizen with nothing on his record and a great love for his country. But even the strongest patriotic love wasn't a match for the first time he'd seen a young Jamie Finnegan. It was love at first site, and Robert was completely taken with him. He hadn't thought twice about following Jamie down the road of temptation, turning his skills as a soldier to his new job as his lover's partner in crime.

Jamie Finnegan had been raised in an Irish mob family in New York, no one ever shielded the young man from the life they lived. From the time he was 16 he started taking jobs of his own, finding that murder was somewhat of a talent of his. At 18 he'd met a strapping young Robert, straight off a tour and looking for a new life outside of the Marines. Jaime gave it to him in the form of a whirlwind criminal romance.

But when Jamie's father found out, he put a hit on Robert. He couldn't stand the thought of his little boy being "corrupted" by this man. They decided that they'd run away together, Jamie leaving behind his family like Robert had left everything behind to be with Jamie. They'd taken jobs in secret to keep going, never allowing their clients to know much for fear of Jamie's father finding them.

Of course, these gangsters wouldn't know any of that. They'd know names, what they did, and their basic reputations. Jamie and Robert didn't divulge any other information to clients. They took serious risks just giving out their names. But they'd been forced to learn everything the police knew about the pair before being thrust into this situation. Hey, who cares if it ever came in handy. At least they knew it, right?

Yeah, right.

Ivan shook the woman's hand warmly and nodded. Im Yong was looking at Alfred like he was scouting him out and he didn't quite live up to his standards. He scowled back at the Asian man, who smirked a bit. That seemed to raise his opinion of the 'assassin' a bit. Mei Li watched the whole exchange with amused eyes, turning to Alfred as the two men broke eye

contact. She extended her hand to him as well, watching him closely as he disentangled himself from Ivan.

"And you must be Jamie Finnegan." Alfred nodded and shook her hand. He had the childish urge to hide behind Ivan just to get away from those eyes of hers. They weren't anything special at first glance, but they were so deep. And they seemed to be much older than the rest of her face, piercing through his soul and seeing everything there. And for a second Alfred thought they were caught. There was no way she could know anything, but he couldn't shake the feeling that she saw right through them.

But if Mei Li knew their secret, she wasn't telling. She merely turned back to her colleagues and nodded, clapping her hands. The two lower ranking men stood to either side of Ivan and Alfred, ushering them around the corner and towards a sleek black car that was parked there for just this purpose. They would be whisked away by the gang members and given their assignment. Or killed and dumped in a ditch. It was hard to tell with these types.

They were shepherded into the car by the two thugs with Soo and Mei. Alfred glanced over his shoulder at the car holding three of their fellow officers as they broke what was to be the last contact they had with the rest of the force until they had the information they needed. It felt cold and lonely, being isolated from his family and friends. But when Ivan reached over and squeezed his hand, he didn't feel so alone anymore and he appreciated in a new way just how close they were going to have to stick together if they wanted this to work.

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The car stopped outside of an innocent looking house out in the suburbs. It wasn't any bigger or grander than any of the other houses on the cul-de-sac and absolutely nothing looked out of place. Ivan didn't know if this was the main base or just where they were going to be kept. Perhaps on the inside this seemingly harmless little cookie cutter house was much more sinister.

But no, as they were herded out of the car and into the house it became apparent that there was absolutely nothing out of place in the house. It didn't even look lived in. Ivan turned to Alfred, who looked back at him and shrugged as if to say Just go along with it. What a big help, Alfred. Thanks. He rolled his eyes and looked back at the house, wondering what it's purpose was. He couldn't even spot any guns.

Mei Li was, apparently, in the mood to give them some information. Because as she stepped into the house behind them, she began talking. "This is a safe house purchased by our organization to store those who we have hired until they are no longer of any use to us. You will be staying here until the job is done or until we deem you too have outlived your use." There was no threatening tone in her voice, but the threat was there. She didn't need to make it any more apparent than that.

"But before you get settled in, our leader has given me a task for the two of you to do. To prove that you are capable, nothing more. If you agree we will give you the details and you will be driven to your destination. If you refuse, then we have no more use for you and your contract will be terminated." Once more she said it calmly, but there was no mistaking that the contract wouldn't be the only thing terminated if they were to refuse.

"Give me a moment to discuss it with my partner and we will get back to you." Ivan said, ushering Alfred into the kitchen. Mei Li merely watched them go with impassive eyes, not sending the thugs after them. Ivan turned to Alfred and looked around as if to try and find a way out of the situation. Who knew what they would have them do? If they were sent to kill someone they couldn't be sure that it would be sanctioned once they were done with the mission. But if they didn't do it they would be killed and their mission would be a failure.

"So what do you think, Jamie? Should we do it? They didn't say anything about paying us for the job." He said, perfect American accent in place and looking nonplussed by the whole situation. They had to keep up the act at all times. Not only were Mei and Im in the room just outside the kitchen where they were standing, Ivan had seen cameras set up here and there. They were being monitored and the gang made no attempts to conceal it.

"I don't know, Rob. Drawing too much attention to ourselves could tip my dad off that we're here. That's the last thing we want." He said, leaning up against the table. He knew the dangers of taking another job just as much as Ivan did, but he couldn't say that. He looked to Ivan for answers and support, but was met with the same doubt he himself had. He took a deep breath and steeled himself, making a split second decision for them both.

He pushed up off of the table and walked over to Ivan, wrapping his arms around his neck and grinning up at him. "It could be fun though, baby. When's the last time we took a job for anything but the money. This one'll be for the thrill. And to save our own asses, but still." He laughed. Ivan laughed along, not really comfortable with the position they were in. But he wrapped his arms around Alfred's waist nonetheless.

"You always did have a weird sense of fun, Jamie. But sure. If you wanna take the job, we'll take the job. You know I can't say no to you." He purred at him, winking. He was surprised when Alfred's face actually lit up in a blush, but he didn't show it. Pathetic boy probably just hadn't had someone flirt with him in awhile. He broke away from the embrace but kept one arm looped around his 'lovers' waist as they exited the kitchen and rejoined Mei Li in the livingroom.

"I trust you have come to the right decision?" She asked, looking up at them. Alfred was struck again by that overwhelming sense of being seen right through. He took a mental note to be wary of her in the future. If anyone was going to blow their cover, he had no doubt that it would be Mei. He nodded and stepped forward, flashing her a grin.

"We wanna do it, just point us in the right direction and we're ready to go." He told her, puffing out his chest. Ivan had to fight the urge not to laugh. Alfred just looked ridiculous, showboating like this. But it had been obvious in the interviews that Jamie was just as cocky as Alfred himself, so perhaps this would play to their advantage. They had been chosen because their personalities matched the assassins so well and it would be easy for them to take on their roles. There wasn't time for other agents with dissimilar personalities to be briefed and deployed.

"There is a night club owner, Gilbert Beilschmidt. He is under our protection, but has not paid his insurance payment this last month. We are not asking you to kill him. In fact, we ask you to avoid such measures if at all possible. We merely wish for you to persuade him to

pay his bills. It would be a shame to lose such a fine businessman." She told them, hands crossed in her lap and eyes boring into them once more.

"I think we can do that. Right, Rob?" He asked, cocking his head to the side and imploring Ivan to agree. Ivan nodded and crossed his arms, leaning against the doorframe between the living room and the kitchen. Mei Li gave a small smile and rose from her seat, bowing to each of them.

"Then I will take my leave of you. A car will be dropped off tomorrow to get you where you need to go. Good day, gentlemen." And with that she left, Im Yong and the two other thugs trailing after her.

Ivan and Alfred were left alone in the house, but they still couldn't let their guard down. Ivan thought of how to inform Alfred of the cameras without alerting whoever was watching that they weren't who they said they were. He opted for pulling Alfred into his arms and leaning in close with a smirk on his face as if he were about to kiss his lover now that the company was gone.

Alfred almost panicked as he was grabbed. The smirk on his partner's face was almost predatory, and he was much too far into Alfred's personal space. It almost looked like Ivan was trying to kiss him! He tried to wriggle away, but Ivan held him fast. Then all of a sudden his partner's lips were to his ear and he was whispering to him. He shuddered slightly as Ivan's breath ghosted over the shell of his ear, telling himself it was from the cold.

"We are being watched. Do not look now, but there are cameras in at least this room and the kitchen. It would be beneficial to keep up the act." He whispered the information to him as if it was sweet flirty nothings. Alfred got the gist of it and leaned into the embrace, giving a little smirk of his own as if in answer to the things Ivan wasn't really saying.

"Alright, then. But let's hope the bedroom isn't bugged. That would be awkward." Ivan chuckled. and shook his head.

"It is just like you to joke in a situation like this. Now let us give them a show that will give them no room to believe we are not what we say we are." He said, grabbing Alfred and kissing him hard. It was sudden and startling but so intense that Alfred could feel his knees go weak for a split second.

Alfred's eyes widened and it took everything in him not to fight the other off. He was supposed to be willing to kiss him, no matter how much he hated the man in real life. So he submitted to the kiss, surprised that it was so hot and passionate. He shouldn't be, really. The man kissed like he fought, with everything he had. It would have been easy to get lost in it if it hadn't been Ivan he was kissing.

When they broke apart they were both slightly out of breath, Alfred's glasses askew and his lips red and puffy. Ivan stared at him for long moments, puzzling the younger cop. There was something in his eyes when he looked at him that had never been there before and it made him wonder if Ivan had really wanted to break the kiss all that much.

He pushed the thought out of his head and turned away from him, winking wickedly over his shoulder. "I'm gonna go shower, hotshot. And that's not an invitation." He laughed and sauntered off, unaware that Ivan was watching his movements closely. Especially a certain part of his anatomy.

Ivan sat down in a chair after Alfred had left, slightly shell shocked at what had just happened. He had meant to give him a quick kiss just for the cameras, no matter how disgusted he was. Instead he'd lost himself in it, something primal taking over him the second their lips met. And when they'd pulled back, Alfred had looked so enticing it had been hard not to kiss him again. What was wrong with him?

He leaned back in the chair, staring out of the window over the neatly manicured suburban lawn and brooded over the events of the day.

Chapter 4

Alfred leaned up against the shower wall, letting the water pouring from the showerhead wash over him like cleansing rain. Something in him felt the need to be washed clean, as if he'd done something dirty or sinful. Everything else in him was simply confused. The kiss had thrown everything into turmoil and he wasn't sure how to react anymore. So many different feelings, so much he didn't understand. Why had Ivan had to go and do that? It was probably, hands-down, the worst thing Ivan had ever done to him in the 5 years they'd known each other.

He couldn't place what it was, but something about that kiss had gotten under his skin and made him feel...something. He couldn't even be sure what that something was. It was so confusing! He didn't know how he felt about the entire situation. He knew what he should feel, and he wanted to feel that way. He wanted to feel disgusted and resigned to maybe having to repeat it. But while the thought of a repeat performance did indeed make his stomach flip, it wasn't flipping the way it was supposed to. He ran a hand through wet hair that was more tan now than its normal color. What was wrong with him? He didn't actually like the kiss, did he? It was absurd.

But the nagging voice in the back of his mind snickered at him, reminding him that he hadn't exactly disliked it, either. And he hadn't been the one to break it, either. He could argue that he had been about to when big nose had beat him too it, but it was useless. You could fool anyone in the world, but you couldn't fool yourself. He hadn't even been thinking of ending the kiss. The thought hadn't even crossed his mind for a second, he was too busy striking the perfect balance between the disgust he should feel and the desire to tumble into the nearest bed with his partner. His fucking partner! Not only was he thinking about sleeping with someone he hated, he was thinking of sleeping with someone he worked with! If that wasn't the dumbest idea ever, he didn't know what was.

Wait, when did this go from thinking about the kiss to sex? Sure, he hadn't gotten any in awhile. But was that really an excuse to look for it anywhere he could get it? Besides, sex with Braginsky would be totally sick, right? ...Right? He tried not to think about it, not to imagine imagining how the explosive relationship that made their fights famous in the department would translate into the bedroom. But everyone knows that the more you try not to think of something, the more you think about it. And Alfred had a very active imagination that could conjure up just about anything.

Ivan growled, sinking his teeth into Alfred's neck in retaliation for the bright red scratches the younger man had left on his back. "Behave, Fredka, or I will have to punish you." He smirked, lapping at the spot soothingly as he aimed a particularly sharp thrust into him. Alfred gasped and pulled at the tuft of silver hair twisted in his fist.

Alfred panted lightly, his hand sliding over his erection. It felt sick and wrong to react like this to thoughts like that. But here he was, desire for the last person on Earth he expected courting through his veins and touching himself. He hadn't realized he was at first, too transfixed with the mental images causing the reaction to realize he was doing it until he was already hard and aching. He pressed up against the tile and spread his legs a bit wider as he conjured up the mental image again. He moaned as quietly as he could manage and stuck a

few fingers in his mouth to get them good and wet before slipping them one by one into himself while simultaneously stretching himself out.

He panted and whimpered as he thrust the fingers into himself, imagining that it was his older partner's cock slamming into him. He was so hard already, but the thought of the larger man overpowering him and overwhelming him made his whole body feel hot. He always found himself with an erection every time Braginsky managed to best him in one of their fights, but he'd always passed it off as an involuntary reaction caused by the fight or flight response. But maybe he really did just want to screw the living daylights out of him. That was fine, you didn't have to get along with someone to have sex. Look at his dad, he didn't love every woman he slept with. It was perfectly fine to be attracted to someone you hated, maybe even to be expected.

He redirected his train of thought, wondering how he'd managed to trail off on a tangent in the middle of masturbation of all things. He reconjured up a nice mental image, this time on his knees with Ivan behind him and his wrists bound to the headboard. He moaned, a little bit louder than he intended, and bucked onto the fingers between his legs. He was so close to completion, muscles tensing as his body prepared for release and a tight, hot feeling pooling in his nether regions. The mental porn video playing on the screen of his mind freeze-framed on an image of Ivan, violet eyes dancing wickedly and a predatory smirk twitching at his lips.

Alfred exploded, groaning as he shot his load and sank down the shower wall into the tub. He grabbed a washcloth, panting heavily with eyes still half mast, to wash himself off while the water still pouring from the showerhead cascaded over him, washing the evidence of his sin away. As he lay there, waiting for the strength of his limbs to return, he thought more on the subject. He would acknowledge now that he wanted Ivan, there was no reason not to. He was attractive and physical, definitely Alfred's type. The only question was whether or not he should pursue it. Ivan hated him as much as he hated Ivan, that was a fact. And if he didn't want Alfred the way Alfred wanted him, then any attempts by Alfred to seduce him would end not only in no sex, but probably with Alfred missing a few limbs.

Another option was to convince Ivan that they needed to sleep together to keep up the ruse and be convincing fake lovers. This would work with or without reciprocal lust from Ivan. But if the kiss from earlier was any indication, the desire wasn't onesided. Ivan wanted to fuck him, and he was going to get what he wanted. Alfred stood up and turned off the water, stepping out of the tub and wrapping the towel around his waist. He grabbed his clothes to put them back on so that he didn't have to walk past Ivan in nothing but a towel, but immediately tossed them in the hamper and strolled out of the bathroom.

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Ivan had been frozen in the chair he had sat down in soon after the kiss that should never have happened. What he needed was a drink, but the liquor cabinet was locked and he didn't know where the key was or what Mei Li and Im Yong Soo would do if he broke it to get in. He didn't want to think about how soft Alfred's lips had been or how his ass had swayed so invitingly as he'd minced off. And to take a shower, of all things. The reminder that Alfred was behind the bathroom door, wet and naked, was not what he needed. What he needed was a cold shower of his own and a few shots.

What he definitely didn't need was Alfred strolling past in nothing but a towel, showing off that bare, damp flesh just when he was struggling hardest with temptation. God was testing him, seeing if he could weather the desire when what he wanted was dangled in front of him. But he was stronger than that. He ignored the man, crossing his legs to hide his shame and swallowing thickly. He would not give into the temptation to slam the wanton little brat against the wall and show him what happens when you expose your body like that.

But Alfred wouldn't be satisfied just knowing that Ivan wanted him. While the satisfaction of knowing his state of undress was driving the other man crazy was very satisfying, it wasn't what he wanted. So he decided he would make a bold move and if Ivan asked, it was part of the ruse. When Alfred wanted something, there was no stopping him. He climbed into the Russian man's lap and linked his arms behind his neck. "I think I know how to make this a bit more realistic." He purred into his ear, delighted at the shiver he could clearly feel go up the other's spine. Oh yeah, he was smokin'.

"Alfred, what are you doing!?" He hissed, looking around in a panic and trying to find a way out of this without making it seem to whoever was watching them that they were lying about being intimate with each other. He wanted this, oh God he wanted this. But that's all it was: Desire, lust, want. It wasn't love, certainly not with this asshole. And what was sex without love? Merely a way to feel good for a small while before everything went back to the way it was before, except with more risk for disgusting diseases.

"I'm horny, you're my only option, and it's certainly going to blow any doubts that we are who we say we are out of their minds. So come on, big guy, rock my world." He taunted, kissing him hotly. He wasn't sure why he was so okay with the sudden realization that he wanted Ivan and wanted him now, but who was he to ask questions? It aided his endgame and he got what could possibly end up being great sex out of it. Or he could get really bad, awkward sex out of it. But still, sex.

Ivan, meanwhile, was getting lost in the heat of those kisses. It seemed real, the passion at least. Alfred may not love him, but he certainly wouldn't object to the things Ivan had just been thinking of doing with him. It was an opening to a chance that he might not ever get again to have this live young man underneath him, begging for him. If Alfred was the type to beg. And somehow Ivan didn't think he was. It was too bad, it would be quite attractive. And maybe they would get along better after resolving the sexual tension. Lord knew they needed to straighten out whatever made them fight so much before it ended up blowing their cover. One night couldn't hurt anything, right?

...Right?

Ivan made up his mind in that fraction of a second, scooping Alfred up and hauling ass up the stairs to the bedroom. He tossed the blonde onto the bed and leered at him as the towel slipped off of his lower body, exposing him fully to the Russian's predatory gaze. It sent nice tingles up and down Alfred's spine, being looked at that way. He smirked back and gazed at the other man with dark, seductive blue eyes. "Are you gonna stand there all day staring, hotshot? Or are gonna come over here and get me?"

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That was all the invitation Ivan needed to cross the room and force Alfred down onto the bed, pinning his wrists and kissing him hard. He could feel the younger cop's toned body through his clothes and he longed for more. More contact, more skin. He sat back, removing the button up shirt and jeans that he had been told to wear. His usual attire would have been too out of place for him to be allowed to wear it. It was a good thing, though, because he usually wore many more layers and it would have delayed the moment of bare skin sliding over bare skin, lips locked and bodies entwined.

Alfred arched against him like a cat in heat, their erections sliding over each other and making both of the men feel like their blood had turned into electricity. Neither of them felt that they could wait any longer. It was like the desire burning through them was a real fire, set to consume them if they waited too long to slake their thirst for each other. Alfred blindly reached up, groping wildly at the bedside table for the handle to the drawer. He held the kiss as long as he could, but broke it off to search with his eyes rather than just his fingers. He found what he was looking for and handed it to the man attacking his neck with love bites just a bit too harsh. But that was just the way Alfred liked it.

"Are you sure you're ready for this already?" Ivan asked in reference to the lube. He himself was already past the point of foreplay, but he didn't want to skip it. Not if Alfred didn't give the go ahead, it would be rude. But Alfred just nodded his head, nipping Ivan's lower lip before sealing them with a kiss. "Did most of the work in the shower. Just lube up and we can skip the prep." He said. But then a wicked grin crossed his face and he plucked the lube out of Ivan's hand. "Or I can do it for you." He popped the cap off the bottle and squirted some of the gel into his hand, reaching for Ivan's erection. He glided his hand up and down the shaft, spreading the lube over it. He looked up at Ivan, a devilish look in his eyes. To Ivan, he couldn't have looked more wanton or fuckable if he was bent over a table, begging.

He tangled his fingers in Alfred's hair, pulling him up by it to kiss him. Alfred apparently wasn't adverse to the rough treatment, making a small aroused noise in the back of his throat as he was hauled up. Nice to know he didn't have to be gentle with him. He had no intention of going soft on the little punk just because they were having sex. He was pretty sure that would leave them both unsatisfied, anyway. Like an argument as opposed to a fist fight.

Alfred's hand continued stroking and playing with his member. He growled into the kiss, making it more aggressive and completely overpowering Alfred. He pushed him down on the bed and pinned him there, biting and sucking at his neck in a way that made the younger man moan so invitingly. He leaned back, observing his partner. Flushed, panting, naked, and practically begging to be fucked. The only thing missing was actual begging, but they could work on that later, if there was a later. For now, it was time to get down to business.

"Spread your legs, blyad." He told him, voice low and gravely. Alfred did immediately as he was told, partly because he wanted this to go down as soon as possible and partly because being ordered around in those sexy bass tones was as arousing as hell. He was rewarded almost instantly as Ivan grabbed his hips and thrust in, not even giving him a moment to

adjust as he began his rough rhythm. Alfred silently sent up a prayer or thanks that he'd prepped himself in the shower, lessening the pain to a degree that took it from unbearable, to just enough to put an edge on the pleasure. He liked it rough, afterall. And he'd never really expected this jackass to be gentle.

From that point on it was less a joining of their bodies and more like a full scale war between the two. Alfred would bite down into Ivan's shoulder to muffle a grunt of pleasure as his prostate was struck, Ivan would retaliate by digging his fingers painfully into Alfred's hips. Alfred would pull his hair and Ivan would slam his head against the bed. For every blow there was a return shot and by the time Alfred felt himself near peaking, he was covered in bruises and bite marks. But as painful and hate-fueled as the sex was, it was the best he'd ever had. There was a kind of thrill in letting go of any inhibitions and causing pain at your own will. And receiving the blows in return just meant that his partner was as into it as he was.

Alfred cried out, pulling harshly at silver strands as he came hard between their intelocked bodies. He felt a warm rush in his gut and another inside where Ivan had followed him to the edge of completion and emptied himself inside of him. He styaed like that for a few mintues more, coiled around Ivan like a tense snake, before slowly disentangling himself and relaxing back onto the bed.

"That was..." He said, panting bearthlessly, unable to find quite the words to describe it.

"Yes..." The Russian man agreed, collapsing onto the bed and staring up at the ceiling.

"Wow." Alfred let out in a rush of breath. That really had been incredible. If he thought fighting with the guy was satisfying, this was a whole new level.

"Yes." Ivan agreed again, not really knowing what else to say. "We should rest now. There is a long day ahead of us tomorrow."

Alfred nodded and rolled over, diving under the covers and snuggling down. He expected Ivan to do the same, sticking to his own side of the bed with his back to his American counter part. But instead the taller man moulded his body to Alfreds and draped his arm over his waist. Alfred wasn't sure he was comfortalbe with spooning with the guy, but Ivan merely shook his head and yawned. "They may still be watching. Besides, you are warm and it is a cold night."

Alfred took the logic as good enough and shrugged, nuzzling into his pillow and sighing contentedly. He'd slept in more uncomfortable places before. And besides, it was kind of reassuring to have someone with him. Maybe it would help him sle-...

Before he could finish the thought, he was already drifting off into dreamland still held fast in Ivan's arms.

Chapter 5

Alfred awoke the next morning to a cold, empty bed and an already voided indentation where Ivan had slept the night before. Usually this might be a cause for concern, but Alfred was more than happy that his bed-mate had left before he'd waken up. It saved an awkward morning-after conversation and the inevitable argument that would ensue. He was sure that the intense level of sheer discomfort would be so hilariously obvious that whoever was watching them would be able to see it right through the cameras.

As it were, Alfred had time and room to stretch out in the bed and roll himself in the blankets in an effort to cling to the warm drowsiness of the first few moments after waking up. He was like a cat in a bed of catnip, rolling and twisting around in the sheets in languid idleness. He felt warm and fuzzy under the cozy sunlight dancing through the slits in the curtains that lay across the bed in long bars. It was as if he was viewing the world through the warm haze of sleep-drunken stupor.

At long last, when he could stay in bed no longer, he disentangled himself from the sheets and slipped out reluctantly. Padding across the wooden floor, he rubbed tired blue eyes and made a beeline for the bathroom. He hadn't had a chance to check the house out last night, but he at least knew where the can was. He instinctively reached to where his toothbrush would be if he were in his apartment, only for his hand to close on empty air. Growling quietly, he looked around the sink for any sort of dental hygiene products.

He found two toothbrushes; one red, one blue. The red one was still damp and a small amount of toothpaste stuck to the handle directly below the bristles. That was fine with Alfred. Red was a Commie color and Ivan could have it. Blue was his favorite, anyway. He had the fleeting urge to dunk the red brush in the toilet and then never ever tell Ivan, but that would be childish; even if it would be so sweet to know that every day he was brushing his teeth with a potty brush.

He pushed the thought away, grabbing the blue toothbrush and dabbed some toothpaste on it, sticking it in his mouth as he checked the cabinets for floss. Finding none, he brushed his teeth and rinsed his mouth out with water. No floss and no mouthwash. This was unacceptable! He couldn't live in a world where he was forced to forgo flossing. He would have to make a trip to the store as soon as possible and pick up the essentials. Nothing was more important than good dental hygiene.

The shower stood in a corner of the room, taking up most of the space but still seeming unobtrusive. It beckoned to him like a siren, the dirt of the day before and the icky feeling he got from touching Ivan eating at his skin like an acid. But as he looked out of the bathroom door and into the bedroom, he saw on the clock that it was already waning into the afternoon and they had a job to do today. It would be better to just freshen up and get on his way. So after washing his face, brushing his hair, applying roll on deodorant, searching for hair gel and finding none, accidentally hitting the wall, cursing and clutching his hand, stumbling out of the bathroom, changing his clothes, re-brushing his hair after it got messed up as he pulled on his shirt, and applying spray deodorant, he was finally ready to face the day.

He found Ivan in the kitchen munching on a piece of toast almost thoughtfully. Alfred has always taken the larger man for a real meat and potatoes kind of guy, someone who would want something more substantial for breakfast than toast. But after a quick survey of the room, he found that it was for good reason that his partner only had chosen toast for his morning meal. The refrigerator was almost completely empty save for a loaf of bread, a carton of orange juice, and a bag of apples. He sighed, grumbling under his breath about useless thugs who couldn't even stock the fridge and grabbed an apple. As he bit into it, he made a mental list of all the things he would need to pick up while they were out (probably after they beat up that poor, innocent man.)

"This officially sucks." Alfred growled, looking around for the coffee pot, hoping beyond all reason that it was there but knowing he shouldn't hold his breath. He almost fell to his knees and praised the Lord when he found that not only did they have a coffee pot, they actually had coffee! Which was a better thing than anyone knew because if he didn't have his morning coffee there was no way he would have been able to deal with his bullshit partner. Who, by the way, had been staring at him like something out of a freak show since he'd gotten into the kitchen.

If Ivan was staring, though, it was only because he had expected the other man to do something drastic the morning after their little folie-a-deux from last night. For one night he'd completely lost his mind and done something he regretted immensely. He was not one of those men who could engage in one-night stands and leave in the morning unscathed. There had been no feeling in their exchange, no positive feeling anyway. And what kind of existence was that? He felt sick with himself and sick with Alfred.

Alfred, however, was perfectly okay with no strings attached sex. It was kind of his thing, actually. He hadn't been able to hold down a stable relationship for more than a month since leaving high school, it just wasn't in his nature. Arthur said he was allergic to commitment. So while his partner fretted over his bad decision, Alfred was cool as a cucumber. His only real concern was food and dental floss.

"About last night..." Ivan began, wondering how to broach the subject with the younger man. But a hand was held up and Alfred shook his head. He gestures subtly to the cameras and put a finger to his lips.

"Yeah, last night was great. Though I woke up this morning with an aching ass, you dickweed." He teased, though the look in his eyes was less teasing and more accusing. "I can only hope the scratches I left on your back hurt enough for a bit of payback."

Ivan felt the marks Alfred had left on his back like burning trails of shame. He would much rather forget that those were even there, but the little shit had absolutely had to bring them up. It was infuriating to not be able to tell the other that their display last night had been disgusting and shameful and they must never do it again.

"I don't know about that. They don't hurt so bad, you've done worse before." He quipped, feeling disgusted with himself. But the place was bugged and their survival depended on him acting as if their encounter had been run-of-the-mill, something they did every night. He would have to swallow his distaste and keep up this charade for as long as possible.

Alfred liked people to believe that he couldn't read the atmosphere, that he was completely clueless when it came to ambiance. But the truth was that he could read people like books, no matter how hard they tried to hide what they were thinking. And he could tell Ivan regretted what they had done last night.

An unwelcome pang of something unpleasant went through him at the thought and Alfred decided that it must be offense. He'd given Ivan access to the kickin'est body in Metropolis and given him what was probably the ride of his life and he regretted it? That fucking douche! But he had to push past his indignation, for the good of the mission and to save his own ass. Which was really kind of important to him, even if Ivan took it for granted.

He took sips of his coffee through pursed lips, discontent radiating off of him like waves of heat. Ivan could feel them from all the way across the room and he wondered if it was his fault Alfred was being pissy or if it was just because of the lack of supplies. He was willing to bank on it being a combination of the two with Alfred leaning more towards angry at him than angry at the world. But he could care less, Alfred could be as angry as he wanted. It would only mean that he would pursue him no further.

A now-empty cup of coffee was set down on the counter and the silent blonde left the kitchen without even looking in his house-mate's direction. He had nothing to say to Ivan right now and didn't see that changing any time soon. Peeking through the blinds, he saw that there was already a car in the driveway. Opening the door and jogging down the front steps, he looked through the windows to find it completely empty. Mei and Im Yong had probably brought it by while the pair of them were sleeping.

He opened the door and slid into the driver's seat of the black SUV, looking around to see if perhaps anything was amiss. For a fleeting second he wished he had a tracking device, something that could lead them back to wherever the car came from. But that would serve no purpose now other than to track Ivan and Alfred's movements. A frown passed over his face for a fleeting moment before he busied himself with the GPS. Directions had already been punched in, presumably by their employers. They would probably lead them to their target.

He searched around, hands probing every nook and cranny of the dash for any sign of a set of keys. Then, as his hand dipped into the cup holder, he heard a jingle and his fingers brushed cold, ridged metal. He grinned victoriously and took up the keys, shaking them to hear the sweet jingle of victory and crawling back out of the car. Guess who got to drive and guess who had to sit in the passenger seat and shut his trap? That's right, Al was the king.

A quick search of the vehicle came up clean with no evidence of bugs or listening devices of any sort. There was, in fact, a tracker attached to the car but that didn't bother Alfred very much. At least he knew there was one place he could be himself without having to watch every little thing he said. Maybe he could tear Ivan a verbal new one once they were en route.

He made his way back into the house with a pep in his step and a whistle on his lips. One-upping Ivan had managed to turn his day around, even if the embers of indignation still smoldered in his gut. But he could set it aside for now to shove it in Ivan's face that he'd found the keys first.

He found his companion in the kitchen, still staring off into space and sipping at his coffee. For a moment anger flared in Alfred's chest once more. Was this motherfucker really so torn up about last night that he had to stare into space like a fucking dead man? Geeze! Alfred had known that Ivan hated him, but this was ridiculous. It takes two to tango. Two. To fucking. Tango!

"Yo, Robbie. They left us a car and directions to get where we're goin'. We should probably head out." He said, trying to seem nonchalant and as if everything was normal. Even if he was going to punch Ivan in the face as soon as they were out of sight of these damn cameras.

Ivan nodded, placing his cup of coffee by the wayside and holding out his hand. "Give me the keys, I'll drive." He replied. Alfred laughed, shaking his head. There was no way in hell he was giving the keys over to Ivan.

"Ah, ah, ah baby~ I went out to the car first, I found the keys, so I'm driving." He sing-songed, jingling the keys by the loop in front of Ivan's face before snatching them away just as the other man reached for them. "And there ain't nothin' you can do about it!" He laughed loudly, the sound grating to Ivan's ears, and turned on his heel to exit the kitchen and the house once more.

Ivan followed after him, keeping his eyes trained on the back of the blonde's head, trying to bore holes in it with his eyes. He resented the American. He hated him, everything he was, and everything he stood for. He hated what they had done, how Alfred had somehow managed to rub it in his face without mentioning it once, and that the young blonde didn't seem to regret it at all. But most of all, he hated himself for still wanting the stupid brat so much.

Last night was supposed to have been the one time he gave into temptation. He was supposed to take one bite out of the forbidden fruit and leave it hanging on the tree with no one the wiser. He hadn't expected it to taste so sweet. His young partner burned like acid in his veins, eating away at his resolve. Alfred had poisoned him with every bite and scratch he'd rained down on Ivan's flesh. Now his thoughts were consumed by him, there was nothing else in his mind.

But who could blame him? Alfred was beautiful by any standard. He enchanted Ivan with the mere sway of his hips or the way his lips curled up over his teeth when he snarled out an insult. His strength of body, spirit, and character amazed Ivan even if he would never admit it. It was a wild beauty, untamed and hard to hold onto; overtly masculine, hard as rock and tough as nails. But that was the way Ivan liked it. And he hated, hated himself for it.

Over-confident steps carried Alfred to the driver's side of the car, the young man slipping like grease into the seat and busying himself buckling his seat belt while his companion folded himself in. Alfred snickered at the sight of his overly-large partner cramped into the SUV, though he wasn't surprised. Their cruiser had always been much too small for the freakishly tall Russian and the SUV was no different.

A heated glare put a stop to the laughter as Alfred put his hands up in surrender and started the car. The engine roared to life, grumbling and growling a steady bass line that quickly faded to a backdrop to the sounds of the world around them. Pulling out of the driveway and

checking the GPS, Alfred tried to come up with small talk to fill the heavy silence pressing down on the two of them.

“So...did you sleep well?” He asked, feeling like an idiot immediately after the question left his mouth. He swore up and down inside his head, wondering how he could be so stupid.

“No talking.” Ivan growled, no more words needed to shut the younger man up.

The silence continued, hanging over them like an ever-present boulder threatening to crush them. Alfred hated it, he hated silence and everything about it. He would rather be shouting than have nothing said at all. He was so averse to silence there was a physical reaction and he started fidgeting and wriggling in his seat like a five-year-old who had to go to the bathroom.

After minutes of this, Ivan sighed heavily and rolled his eyes. Was the boy really so desperate for attention that he would pull childish stunts like this? Of course he was, it was Alfred. It should come as no surprise that he couldn't go five minutes without some form of attention.

“What is it?” He hissed, finally turning to the other. “What do you want from me? Because if you are wanting something to be started because of last night-” He was cut off there as Alfred gave an indignant cry.

“Start something? You think I want to start something with you? You fucking jackass! You think I don't know the difference between one night of hate sex and the start of a fucking relationship? What am I, some kind of chick? Fuck you, man, just fuck you.” Alfred snarled, hands gripping the steering wheel so hard the knuckles turned white.

“Then why did you do it!? You hate me and I hate you, so why initiate sex!?” Ivan cried, gesturing wildly as he yelled. “If it was just to keep up appearances you would not have done it, you would have made every excuse not to sleep with me, so why!?”

“Because I wanted to, alright!? You're a commie asshole and I hate you, but you're hot and my only option right now. That's all, that's fucking it.” Alfred growled, teeth bared and face twisted in rage.

Ivan's heart twisted in his chest, an unwelcome and pitiful feeling. He didn't want to feel a jolt of pain in his chest every time Alfred reminded him how much they hated each other, or when he stressed how little it had meant. The pain and confusion turned to rage and he reached out, grabbing the steering wheel in one and closing the other around Alfred's neck.

“Stop talking, you worthless little shit, and listen to me. You will not touch me again. You will not tempt me with your whore body or touch me while we are in bed. If you do this, I will not kill you.” He said, his voice manic and barely above a whisper. It was a cold tone, one that lowered the temperature in the car a few degrees.

Alfred panicked, his hands scrambling at the large hand on his throat. His first thought was that they were going to crash and his second was Holy shit he's trying to kill me! Then, just as suddenly as he'd reached out and grabbed him, Ivan retracted his hand. He fixed him with that frigid glare, the one that Alfred knew meant trouble, and gestured towards his gun.

“Do you hear me, whore?” He asked, voice deceptively calm. Alfred wanted to tell him to fuck off, or to stop calling him a whore, but for the first time ever Alfred was truly afraid of Ivan. The man had always been mental, but this was just another fucking level. If he'd been asked before today if he thought Ivan was capable of murder he would have said no, but now....

“Yeah, asshole. I understand. And don't fucking call me a whore.” He shot off, consciously having to stop himself from tensing in fear as he said it. He was lucky and Ivan didn't hit him, but still he didn't say another word. He stared straight ahead, not even peeking out of the corners of his eyes at the man in the passenger seat, a man he thought he knew.

“I am sorry. Would you prefer “slut”, since you are not paid for your promiscuity?” Ivan drawled sarcastically and with no small amount of contempt. It stung Alfred and his first instinct was to lash out, but he kept silent. The last thing he wanted to do was provoke Ivan into choking him again.

Soon enough, Ivan fell into a silence of his own and stared off into space out the window. He mulled over the encounter in his own way. He had no clue what had come over him. All he could remember was a black rage hitting him like a brick wall and the next thing he knew he was releasing Alfred's neck. He wished he could say that he'd never done anything like that before, but he knew very well the blind rage lurking beneath his cold, sarcastic surface. Rage formed and compressed in a broken home and solidified in a school system that didn't look favorably upon foreigners, gay men, or the eccentric.

He had thought it had been all under control. He could go to work, maybe rough up a few drug dealers, fight with Alfred, and go home a happy man. His inner monster having been contented by that small period of lashing out. The more time he spent around Alfred, though, confused and disoriented him. A confused and disoriented Ivan was a dangerous Ivan.

The minutes crept by in silence, nothing but the shops lining the city streets taking their attention away from the tight, heavy quiet that pressed on them like a boulder. It gave Alfred creeping feelings and he could swear there were spiders crawling on his arms. It took all he had not to start slapping at them. He couldn't stand silence. He needed noise, sound, something to engage him.

He started humming, just to break the tense silence. Ivan glared over at him, murder in his eyes, but Alfred ignored him. There was no way he was going back to that awful silence, even if the humming was making things between them even more tense and awkward.

Just as Ivan as about to threaten Alfred with violence to make him shut up, they arrived at their destination. The only sign tat Alfred gave that he was angry as he exited the vehicle was the slam of the car door. His face and body language hid his real emotion, a grin on his face and a pep in his step. He didn't know why, but he just felt that Jamie would be one to be chipper when going to beat a poor man senseless for an organized crime family.

Ivan slipped easily back into his own character, knowing that the American accent he would have to fake would taste and feel like tar in his mouth. He hated this country more and more as he spent time around Alfred. He would still rather stay here than go back to Siberia, working as a traffic cop in a small, bitterly cold village out in the sticks.

The place was nice, the paint and sign seemingly new or just very well kept. The black door was roped off with blood red velvet, a red carpet rolling out from the door to welcome in guests lucky enough to gain entry. The sign above said "Chick Magnet" with a yellow bird flapping its wings. Now, however, the signs were dark and the door closed. A lone plastic bag skittered across the pavement, driven by the wind.

The nightclub parking lot was deserted save for a lone silver sports car with a vanity plate that read "AWESOME" and sported a black and white flag Alfred couldn't identify on the antenna. It was the middle of the day and it wasn't really surprising that no one was here. Alfred certainly didn't want to be here. It was too early and he'd been dealing with too much shit this morning to fuck with some sleazy night club owner.

He marched right on over to the door and kicked it in, a grin on his face and a spark in his eye. He thought for an instant that if he hadn't become a cop, he probably could have been an actor. He was so bomb at this.

"Here's Jamie!" He laughed, looking around for his victim. Ivan followed behind him, worried that perhaps Alfred was having a little bit too much fun with this. Alfred was a natural show-off and that, Ivan feared, was what would blow their cover. The boy's naïve show-boating would get them in trouble sooner rather than later.

A lone figure stood in the corner, robed in shadow with only his eyes showing through the gloom. Alfred immediately balked, his superstitious heart almost stopping when he saw the two red pinpricks standing out like sparks in the night. Oh dear Lord, he didn't want to die like this!

Ivan, however, was unfazed and he crossed the room with long strides to stand before the red-eyed man still shrouded in darkness.

"You're Gilbert Beilschmidt, right?" He asked, the drawl of Americana burning his tongue like acid. He vowed to speak nothing but Russian for a week after this was all over.

"That depends who's asking." The man answered casually, the shrug of his shoulders barely perceptible through the gloom. He made no move to exit the shadows, preferring his blanket of mystery. Alfred couldn't shake the idea that he was some form of demon or ancient spirit and that he and Ivan had stumbled onto something they shouldn't mess with. His eyes were red, for Pete's sake!

"Our names are not important. All you need to know is that Mei Li sent us." He answered back just as non-chalantly, as if it was an innocent referral from a friend. The shadowed man stiffened visibly, a light growl issuing forth from his corner.

“If you think I'm going to pay them, you're crazy! I'm sick of their mother fucking bullshit. I don't need to pay some hoity-toity gang members to run my business. And if you think you can come in here and beat it out of me, you better know that I won't go down easy!” The man snarled, launching himself out of the shadows and right into Ivan's face. There was a look of pure hate in his eyes, daring Ivan to try anything.

Immediately Alfred's fears that they were dealing with the supernatural were assuaged and the fear left him in a whoosh filled only by burning curiosity. The man's skin was as pale as paper, his hair completely white. Well that certainly explained the red eyes, now didn't it? He'd never met an Albino before and he was just disappointed that his first encounter had to take place like this.

“Hey, Gil, we don't like this any more than you do.” Alfred sighed, his shoulders shrugging and a long-suffering look flitting across his features. “But we got a job to do, just like you do. It's just business.” He took a few steps closer, the curiosity taking hold of him now that the irrational fear was gone.

“Did I say you could call me Gil, arschloch?” The man sneered, German accent thick on his tongue, his pearly teeth almost as white as his hair and seeming almost pointed in the dim lighting of the deserted night club.

“Well so-rry, Gilbert.” Alfred drawled back, his own teeth baring in an idle but predatory smile. It was a look Ivan wasn't accustomed to seeing on his partner's face. Even when they fought there was never that easy threat in his eyes, like a lazy panther looking down on a stray cat. A feeling of green jealousy rushed over him. Why would Alfred reserve that look from him? What about this pale, angry man made him so special? A frown came over his face instantly and the psychotic need to possess Alfred's every thought and emotion welled up in him.

Red eyes flicked over to the man in the corner, an amused light coming to life in their depths. “Hey, schatzi, I think your boyfriend over there is getting jealous.” He sing-songed, an insufferable smirk that Ivan longed to wipe off sliding onto his smug face.

Alfred cocked an eyebrow and looked over at his partner, snickering almost derisively. “Don't mind him, he doesn't like it when I talk to other guys. Do ya, baby?” He purred, throwing a wink in Ivan's direction. White-hot rage tore at Ivan and it took all of his self-control not to snap.

“Nah, sugar, that ain't it.” He answered with a laugh that he hoped sounded easier than it felt. “I just don't like it when we have to waist our time with pissy little vampire Nazis.” He shot at Gilbert with a dark, crazed look that had the albino man baulking.

Alfred didn't miss a second of it. What had gotten into Ivan? He'd never given a shit before how he talked to perps or the rest of the guys at the station. Had their tryst opened up a can of worms that should have stayed tightly sealed?

“Let's just get this over with so we can all go home with minimal damage to our internal organs, okay? We don't want to kill you and you don't want to die, so this should work out if you just cooperate.” Alfred cut in, bodily putting himself between Ivan and the German man. “Give us the money and I won't have to sick my partner on you. And let me just warn you, you don't even wanna know what he does when I let him off his leash. Got him out of a loony bin.” Alfred threatened easily, inspecting his nails.

Gilbert scoffed and reached behind him, backing up and cocking a shotgun in Alfred's face. “Or you can get the hell out of my club.” He snarled. Alfred, to his credit, looked almost bored. This wasn't the first time he'd had a gun pointed in his face and heavens-to-Betsy, it wouldn't be the last.

“I wouldn't do that if I were you. That thing's not even loaded.” He smirked. He'd taken a gamble, bluffing to the club owner's face. It payed off with a moment of hesitation on Gilbert's part and in a flash, Alfred had taken advantage of the chip in his defenses and taken the gun from him. Gilbert swallowed and raised his hand, the barrel of his own gun now pointed in his face.

“Rob, go get the money out of the cash register. If there's not enough there, check the office. There's sure to be a safe. I'm sure Gilbert won't have any problem helping us with the combination. Will ya, Gil?” He asked with an easy, teasing smile.

As Alfred held their unfortunate target at gunpoint, Ivan moved back behind the counter. The cash register, an older model from before everything had gone electronic, yielded it's fruits easily. As Alfred had surmised, however, there wasn't enough left from last night's sales to pay Gilbert's bill. Ivan motioned towards the back, Alfred following his lead with Gilbert in front of him. The barrel of the gun never wavered from it's position directly in line with the club owner's heart.

Something about the way Alfred coolly held an innocent man at gunpoint made Ivan want him even more and it was going to be a struggle, once this was all done, not to throw him up against a wall and fuck him senseless. Ivan was a cold, violent man who appreciated the cold and the violent. Alfred, usually bright and sunny even in his anger, had shown Ivan a side of himself that severely turned him on.

As Alfred held the gun steady at his back, Gilbert dialed in his combination and stepped aside as Ivan took what he owed and shoved it into a bank bag. “That should just about cover it. Thanks for doin' business with us.” He grinned, clapping Gilbert roughly on the back. The Albino man swallowed thickly and rubbed his shoulder, not taking his eyes off of Alfred.

Al grinned, his pearly whites gleaming under the florescent lighting of the office. “How 'bout you sit right on down there in that chair.” He told him, poking him over to the cushy chair in front of the desk. As soon as he seated, he gestured to Ivan without taking his eyes or the gun off of Gilbert. “Honeybunches, be a doll and tie him up for me would ya?” He cooed at Ivan, making kissy faces at him. Said 'honeybunches' clenched his fist in an effort not to clock Alfred upside the head and grabbed a string of lights from the corner and wound them around the pale man, tying them off so he wouldn't be able to wriggle free.

“Don't worry, it's a Friday. Someone'll come along and find you after too long.” Alfred quipped, propping the shotgun up against the far wall and giving a jaunty, two-fingered salute before turning smartly on his heel and bouncing out of the room. Ivan followed behind like a shadow, one last demented look shot in Gilbert's direction as he disappeared behind the corner and out of site.

Sitting there tied up under the bright lights of his office with the safe wide open and at least a thousand dollars missing, Gilbert was distinctly glad that that was all they had taken.

Chapter 6

As they stepped out of the dim shroud of shadows that clung to the inside of the nightclub, Ivan watched Alfred carefully. He hadn't changed his body language back yet from that easy grace and it was driving Ivan absolutely mad. Every swish of his hips, every swing of lean but powerful arms made him want to rip into him.

He hated that he wanted him so much and he hated himself for it. But mostly, mostly he just hated Alfred. He wanted to rip him apart, to tear into his flesh so deeply that the wounds never healed. He wanted to mark him, claim him, to possess him in a way that no sane person would ever want to possess another being. The gruesome thoughts tumbling about his head made his stomach roll at the same time they sent shivers of arousal through his body.

If only the stupid little fucker would drop the act and go back to being annoying and stupid, he could calm back down and forget that these sinful, dirty thoughts had ever crossed his mind. He could forget the scent of his skin from the night before, or the way his eyes had danced so impishly in the moonlight. An imp, it was fitting. Surely Alfred was some kind of evil being, a demon from hell sent to seduce him. No mere human could be that tempting, that...beautiful and yet so forbidden at the same time.

He stalked towards the car, fists clenching and unclenching in a futile attempt to quell the mix of rage and want that consumed him. Alfred had no right to do this to him, to have so much control over his thoughts and emotions.

Ivan was a guarded, unemotional man who liked to play things close to his chest. It had never suited him to be open about his feelings or to get close to any human being other than his sisters. Emotions confused and disoriented him for the most part and when he was confused, he often lashed out. It was infuriating to him that this spoiled little brat had the power to coax things out of him. Not only the desire, though that was disconcerting on its own, but the easy way he made Ivan visibly angry or the way he had the power to ruin his entire day. Still, being angry was better than Alfred wiggling his way past Ivan's defenses in a positive way. Anger and hatred was so much easier to manage than happiness and friendship and it hurt less when it ended.

Still, they'd proven before that they could be intimate without destroying that fragile equilibrium of vitriol. Perhaps it was worth it to try again, to dance their delicate and dangerous dance of seduction and violence. For once Ivan was almost sure that he could have his cake and eat it, too.

A slow smirk spread across his face as he widened his stride to catch up with Alfred, swiftly pinning him to the hood of the SUV. Violet eyes danced dangerously as he looked down at his partner. The younger man stared up at Ivan, upper lip twitching momentarily into a warning snarl. Ivan almost laughed at that before sweeping down to capture Alfred's lips in a hungry kiss.

For a second, Alfred responded and it seemed like Ivan would get what he wanted. But suddenly everything shifted and Alfred was pushing him off with a low growl. The Russian thought for a moment that Alfred would come back in a counter-attack, but he stayed where he was, eyes glinting like steel and lip raised in that same snarl.

“If I’m a whore, you better fucking pay me before you try anything.” He spat out, wiping his mouth and turning swiftly on his heel to climb into the car. Ivan stood there, stock still, as the younger man turned on the car, only moving when it became apparent that Alfred had no qualms about abandoning him there. He ran after the car as it began to move, wrenching the door open and jumping into the moving vehicle.

“Nice to see you could join us.” Mocked Alfred, gripping the wheel so hard his knuckles turned white. Ivan frowned as he buckled his seatbelt, eyes trained on Alfred’s face. There was real rage there and what seemed like a little bit of hurt. But that couldn’t possibly be true. Alfred couldn’t be fazed by anything. He would know, he’d tried! He could rile him up, get him mad, really piss him off, but nothing he’d ever said had ever hurt him.

Ivan paid it no heed. Why should he care if Alfred had been hurt? It wasn't his concern, surely, if the boy couldn't handle a little insult. If he didn't want to be called a whore, perhaps he shouldn't open his legs so readily. Certainly not to men whom he had given every indication that he despised. Only a whore would sleep with someone they hated just because they were horny.

Despite his assurance to himself that he didn't care if Alfred was hurt, he couldn't help but look over at him every few seconds, as if checking to see if he was still angry. The other man's expression changed little with each glance and only once did Ivan catch his eye. Ivan felt a chill in the car as he met those eyes, icy blue and yet dancing with the fires of hell. He'd never seen Alfred this angry. No, that was a lie. He'd seen this kind of anger from Alfred once before.

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For the last 40 hours Ivan and Alfred had been working a kidnapping case. Ivan had gone home to sleep and let his sisters know he was still alive once or twice, but Alfred was tireless. He seemed almost to not need sleep. Ivan hadn't seen him ingest anything more substantial than the thick black coffee left to simmer all day in the machine in the precinct. He was a man possessed, wholly unaware of anything but the little girl they were trying to find.

She'd been kidnapped by a known pedophile, who had gotten off on a technicality only a day before taking her. Alfred had blamed himself, thinking that if he'd only looked harder they could have found something to put away the bastard at least until his victims were adults. Ivan knew better, he knew that Alfred had done the best he could. But his partner was still young and every case was still so personal to him. Ivan sometimes thought that Alfred would always let cases get to him like this; he was just that kind of a person. Or he would be until he had an "accident while cleaning his gun" a few years down the line after it all got to be too much.

They both knew the chances of finding her were slim and only getting slimmer. Ivan, as much as it killed him, wanted Alfred to just put it aside and give up. But the boy wouldn't

listen to him. He was so caught up, so involved; he couldn't see that even if he found the perp the girl would probably be dead. He admired Al's drive and dedication, but the kid was a fool.

The call came in just as Ivan came back to the precinct after heading home for a quick shower and to let the girls know he was okay. He had lingered longer than he should have in Natalia's room, watching the little girl sleep so peacefully and wondering what he would do if it was her who had been taken and not this poor little girl he'd never known.

Almost as soon as he'd walked in the door, his partner had dragged him back out again without a word. The fire in his eyes and the quick cadence of his steps let Ivan know that it was best not to argue. He hadn't known his partner long at this point, but there were some things he'd been able to figure out about him. One was that he was about as stubborn as Ivan was himself.

Someone had called in an anonymous tip, responding to the Amber alert. An old lady who was half-senile and blind in one eye, but it never hurt to check it out and Alfred just had a gut feeling that the woman knew what she was talking about. Sure enough, when they got to the empty warehouse in the meat-packing district, they found the sicko's truck parked out front.

They circled the building, looking for all exits and entrances, waiting for the warrant from the DA. Alfred was itching to bust in, knowing the bastard probably had the little girl inside. But without the warrant, the pedophile would only get out again.

Then came the cry of help from inside the building, the cry of a little girl. It could only be their victim, crying out for help she couldn't know was already on the way. With probable cause, Alfred busted in through the nearest door, gun drawn and Ivan not far behind.

They wound their way through the pre-packaged meat, following the cries into the freezer. They echoed off the walls, making it difficult to figure out where they were coming from. Alfred was determined, though, and skilled at his job. Ivan's heart raced, thumping in his throat as they tried to locate the girl, going through each room and clearing it. With every empty room his heart sunk a little and he sent up a fervent prayer that they'd find her in time, that the worst case scenario didn't come to pass.

He kicked the door to a freezer room open, checking quickly for the pair. His finger was ready on the trigger of his gun, itching to put a bullet in the man's skull. He knew Alfred felt the same, almost hoping that the man gave them a reason to shoot. If there was one type of person who deserved death it was child molesters.

The room was barren and cold, their breath puffing in white clouds from their mouths, but the screaming seemed to get louder. They were getting closer, Ivan could feel it in his gut and by the way Alfred was clenching his hand around his pistol, he knew his partner could too. They moved across the room almost silently, eyes scanning for any sign of where the perp may have taken the girl. It was dingy and freezing and hard to see, but a scrap of bright pink cloth caught Ivan's eye.

His heart sank as he retrieved the shirt, a child's, from its place on the floor. Were they too late? Had the man already...no, he couldn't think about that. He couldn't think about that



innocent little girl being ruined or how he would feel if it was Natalia in her place. They were so very close in age, the girl and his sister...

He saw another piece of cloth in a doorway hidden by a stack of boxes, visible only if you knew where to look. Her jeans. Oh God, they were too late, weren't they? A sob caught in his throat and Alfred's lip curled into a snarl as he busted through the doorway into the next room.

Compared to the freezer room, this one was warm but no more inviting. The lighting was even dimmer, the only illumination coming from tiny slits high up in the wall where windows had been boarded up. Boxes were stacked high along the walls and it looked like any other room in any other warehouse. Except for the small alcove near the middle of the room where the bastard had set up a bed with many toys and stuffed animals. The sick freak kept kids here while he...

He was standing over the girl, eyes dark and lustful. He'd already undressed her and she was screaming and trying to get away while he held her down and tried to free himself from the confines of his pants. Ivan felt sick watching it and his hand shook holding his gun.

“Hold it right there, pervert!” Alfred growled, raising his gun and pointing it directly at the man’s head. The perp looked around, eyes wild, and stopped. For a moment he stood there, transfixed, staring down the barrel of Alfred’s gun.

Time seemed to stop as Alfred stared that freak down, the man stock still like a rabbit that's caught the scent of a predator. He knew now that he was done, no matter what he did. Ivan could see it in his eyes. There was no way he was getting out of this one, not this time.

And then, all of a sudden, something snapped inside of that man. Disregarding the gun trained on him by a master marksman, he turned back to the girl, eyes crazed and the little girl looking more frightened than ever.

A crack, like a whip on a man's back, and it was over. A quick, clean headshot and the man slumped to the floor, the little girl screaming bloody murder. She would probably remember this day for the rest of her life. Looking into Alfred's stone cold blue eyes and seeing the almost indifferent hatred there, Ivan knew that he would, too.

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There was something different in Alfred's eyes now. The seething hate there wasn't cold and indifferent. It was hot, searing, and Ivan knew that this time it was directed at him. For a split second Ivan wanted to grin. To have such intense and heated emotions directed at him made his blood sing, even if they were negative emotions. He wanted all of Alfred, every facial expression, every temper, and every outburst. That possessive instinct roared in him like some primeval monster, hungry and dissatisfied.

He didn't even try to squish it down anymore. He just took it for what it was, a twisted, evil need in him he couldn't control. He couldn't even say he wouldn't indulge it again, given the chance. He'd take Alfred hard and rough up against a wall if Alfred would let him. He

wanted to see that hate-filled inferno in his eyes tempered with passion. And then he wanted to fuck it out of him so that all that was left was...

What?

What would be left of Alfred for Ivan if there wasn't hate? He certainly didn't smile at him like he did the others, wish him well on his birthday, or go out for drinks with him after work. The only thing that made up their relationship was mutual hatred, begrudging teamwork, and now sex.

The thought unsettled him. Not so much the fact that this was all there was to their dynamic, he'd known that for a long time. No, what disturbed him was that he wanted to know what more there could be. He wanted to see Alfred without that hate in his eyes. He didn't necessarily want them to get along, but he wanted to know what he was missing before he committed to hating him for the rest of his life.

As they sped down the streets of the outer city, traffic already dispersing, Alfred gripped the wheel so tightly his knuckles turned white. How dare he? How dare Ivan call him a whore!? He'd given him the ride of his fucking life and that ungrateful bastard...agh! He was just like....

He was just like Sean.

Sean Jameson had been Alfred's first boyfriend, his first love. Back when Alfred was only 16: young, shy, innocent, he'd loved that boy with all his heart. They were happy, or so he thought. Alfred was, at least. Sean pressured him constantly to have sex, saying that if Alfred really loved him, he'd go all the way. Alfred didn't want to, he'd seen what became of his father's girlfriends. But he did love Sean and when he threatened to leave him, Alfred consented.

It had been awkward and painful, but wasn't everyone's first time? But afterwards Sean had just gotten up and left without a word. After that, every time Al tried calling him or talking to him at school, he would act like he wasn't there. Alfred made himself sick worrying about why his boyfriend was being such an asshole.

That is, until he overheard him calling him a whore and laughing about it to his friends.

He'd seen red, charging up to him and punching him right in the jaw. He'd knocked out two teeth and given him a big, dark, swollen bruise, breaking up with him right on the spot. That night, cradled in his brother Francis' arms, he'd cried himself to sleep. After that, Alfred had embraced the words flung at him, having sex at his own discretion with whoever he wanted and forming no emotional attachments.

That didn't mean it didn't still hurt.

He didn't know why. He'd buried that pain deep inside of himself for so long. And it wasn't like he gave a shit what Ivan thought. But, dammit, for some reason it just hurt when Ivan said it. Maybe because he had to work with the guy, maybe because he was just having

issues, maybe because he just reminded him so much of Sean. He didn't know. But it stung like the crack of a whip on his cheek.

The rage burned in him, screaming white at its core and all-consuming. It was a star, a supernova, exploding from him in growls and curse words and the clenching of his hands tight around the steering wheel. One could almost see the steam coming off his ears as he tried his best to ignore Ivan.

But it was hard to. Not only because he was so pissed at him, but also because he wasn't someone who kept anything in verbally. The silence bugged him almost more than what Ivan had said. But after a few more minutes passing, he just couldn't take it anymore. He had to talk. Scream, yell, curse, something!

"How fucking dare you, you asshole? You call me a fucking whore. Check in the goddamn mirror! If only whores open their legs for men they hate, as you say, then guess what? You're a fucking whore, too. Just because you fucked me doesn't mean you're some paragon of virtue. You aren't a victim in this! You were a willing participant. It isn't my job to make sure you keep it in your pants, that's your job." He snarled, eyes burning through Ivan as fast as fire through the pages of an old book.

"You are a whore." Ivan sneered, not looking over at Alfred. That sinking feeling that he'd actually hurt his partner started rearing its head again, but Ivan squashed it down like a bug. "Regardless of my virtue, you're a whore. I did not want you until you tempted me, I did not start this." He laughed cruelly, finally pinning Alfred with a condescending gaze. But what he saw when he looked over...he wasn't prepared for that.

All of the heat had gone out of Alfred. He was clutching the steering wheel like his life depended on it, arms shaking. He wasn't crying, the boy was too strong and proud for that, but there was a glossy sheen to his blue eyes, like they were made of glass. He opened his mouth to say something, anything. To apologize, to make it worse, he didn't know. But he was cut off before he could even utter a word as the car screeched to a halt beside an empty field just outside of the city on their way back to the suburbs.

"Get out." Alfred growled, the rumble of thunder in the distance in an empty desert. Ivan sat still, just staring at Alfred, unbelieving that he would just leave him there. "I said get out of the damn car!" He roared, the thunder quickly getting closer as the storm of his anger moved through the sky. Then he did something Ivan would never have expected: He got out of the car, too.

"What?" He asked, with a sneer. "Are we just going to leave the car here and walk the rest of the way because you're throwing a temper tantrum, you overgrown child?" He scoffed.

Alfred didn't say anything. He didn't even acknowledge that Ivan had said anything. He just stalked right up to him until Ivan thought he was going to pass him entirely before stopping abruptly and smacking his fist square into his partner's jaw. A loud crack could be heard, a huge bruise forming almost immediately on Ivan's jaw and Alfred's knuckles already sore from striking bone. But he didn't care. He just swung another punch, catching his cheek with a right hook.

There were many things that could be said about Alfred. He was brash, impetuous, didn't think things through, but no one could say he wasn't the best boxer at the precinct. Every year there was a tournament held and every year, Alfred won. And Ivan was getting the full blast of his skills.

"You like calling people whores? You like looking down on them like you're tough shit, big guy? How fucking horrible must you feel about yourself that you have to go around insulting others to feel goo about yourself." He growled, swinging again.

This time, Ivan anticipated it and dodged, barely having time to step back before the fist swung right past the tip of his prominent nose. "I do not insult, I tell the truth. And if you are insulted by the truth, perhaps you should not act like a whore!" He snarled back, swinging one large paw of his own at Alfred, who dodged deftly. Strong and quick, a bad combination to be up against, but Ivan had had worse opponents.

"How I act is my own fucking business. If you didn't want to have sex with me, you could have said so!" Alfred growled, swinging another punch and getting another hit, this one straight on Ivan's nose, the large feature twisting to the side and beginning to bleed. Good, he'd broken it.

"Or is that not it?" He sneered. "You wanted it, I know you did. All I had to do was offer it and you jumped at the chance. No, you aren't mad because you didn't want it. You're mad because you're ashamed that you wanted it." He growled, giving him another tap on the mouth.

A spike went through Ivan as Alfred hit on the core matter of things. He wasn't angry at Alfred, he was angry at himself. He was supposed to have more self-control than this. He was supposed to be the calm, collected one. But Alfred was right. The second the younger man had offered himself to him, Ivan had gorged himself on Alfred like a man dying of starvation offered a grand, delectable feast. And just like that, he realized that he'd needed Alfred for a long time. The seething hatred he'd thought he'd felt watching the younger cop with the others, laughing and joking around the water cooler...that had always been jealousy. Even the jealousy he'd thought he'd felt had been his way of rationalizing the desire. He'd wanted him so badly, but had been so ashamed of himself for it, that he'd buried every positive emotion surrounding Alfred until they were all twisted and black. But the desire still hadn't gone away, it had just rooted itself in his hatred and grown from there, a twisted tree of black, rotted wood.

If Alfred saw the realization in his eyes, he didn't say anything. Instead, he just sent him another right hook, his meanest punch, his own knuckles starting to bleed. Ivan realized then that he hadn't even gotten a hit in. But that would change, that would change quickly.

He reached out, taking Alfred by the throat and squeezing, watching as his face first paled, and then began to grow red. "You stupid little child!" He growled. "You couldn't have left well enough alone, could you? Did you know? Is that why you had this arranged, this farce of a mission? Did you know all along and just planned to...to trick me, to toy with me!?" He snarled, unable to help the tears rolling down his cheeks. He didn't want to feel this way, he didn't. It was sick and wrong and all he could think of was Katyusha's disappointed face and how his mother's heart would have been broken if she'd lived to see this.

Alfred couldn't breathe and as the darkness started to close in on him, he could barely see, either. Ivan was lost, he knew, he wouldn't listen to reason, he wouldn't let go. He was too far gone. But Alfred wasn't going to go without a fight. With the last breath he had in his lungs, purplish red lips tugged up into a labored smirk as he rasped out, "Faggot."

Ivan let go immediately, eyes widening in fear and pain. Suddenly he was back in high school the teasing and taunting ringing in his ears, even though he'd tried so hard not to act on his unnatural urges. And here he was, standing over the one person who had successfully made him forget about how wrong it was, watching him gasp and choke, thick bruises in the shape of Ivan's hands beginning to form on his neck.

He vowed then and there that he would never, ever act on those urges again. Not only because they were sick and wrong, but because he knew he was a monster who would do nothing but hurt any man who could convince him to lay aside those convictions like he had hurt Alfred. Not just the bruises on his neck, but the look in his eyes when Ivan had rejected him this morning and the second look at the club.

Alfred gasped and choked on the ground, wondering why Ivan had put him down and why he was looking at him like that. Alfred didn't buy that Ivan was truly sorry, not with the way they'd treated each other for so long. Not that he'd started it. They'd been friends when they'd started out together and now...well look at them. What had happened?

"Please...Alfred-" Ivan started, still looking so dismayed it almost hurt to look at him. But Alfred put up a hand to silence him, not even having the strength to speak yet.

"Save it." He finally rasped. "Don't say you're sorry because you're not. Don't promise never to do it again because you probably will. I don't want any more lies and backstabbing and backhanded words. I want to know here and now why you hate me so much!" He snarled.

Ivan was taken aback, stammering and spluttering, unable to speak. Alfred had never seen him like this, flustered and awkward. It was a throwback to Ivan's years as a teenager before he'd hardened himself against the evils of the world and the evils of his own sick desires.

"Well?" He growled, blue eyes narrowing. "Spit it out! Why do you hate me? We used to be friends!"

"Because this is wrong!" Ivan cried at last, burying his face in his hands. "I shouldn't...I shouldn't want you like this! You shouldn't have wanted me! We're both men! It's sick and wrong and we can't...we can't! My mother is rolling in her grave right now because her only son has disgraced her and my sisters...oh god, if my sisters ever found out..." He sank to the ground, completely breaking down.

Alfred was completely taken aback. He'd never, never even seen Ivan cry. He'd never even seen him look sad. The closest he'd ever got was that far off look in his eyes the one time they'd talked about their families. But that was back when they'd been friends, when they'd first joined the force. This was different. They were enemies now and here he was, on the ground weeping because he didn't want to be attracted to him.

“Hey...” He murmured, kneeling down in front of him and touching his shoulder. Ivan jerked back as if he’d been burned and Alfred did the same, holding his hand to his chest. “Dude... man...it’s gonna be okay, man. It’s not as bad as you think! Being...the way we are.” He hesitated to say gay, knowing that Ivan probably wasn’t okay with that. “It’s not wrong or sick or gross. They just tell you that because they’re stuck up old pricks who aren’t getting’ any themselves.” He soothed, still not reaching back out to touch him. “Hell, do you see anyone at the precinct givin’ me a hard time? What about Liz? She’s bi and no one bugs her. Mei didn’t say anything and she thinks we’re lovers.”

“It isn’t the opinions of strangers and co-workers I worry about.” Ivan spat, his voice low and gravelly. “It is my poor parents in heaven, my sisters here waiting for me, and God who I worry about.”

Alfred was an avowed atheist and wanted to snort and tell Ivan he shouldn’t care what someone’s imaginary friend thought, but he really didn’t think this was the time. Instead he just mustered up a kind smile. “Hey, dude...if God hates us fags so much, why does he keep making us, hmm?” He asked, giving him a wink. He wasn’t even mad at the other man anymore. Ivan just looked...broken. “And why are we all so cute?” He grinned.

Ivan snorted, rolling his eyes. “God does not make men gay. He makes all men to love women and then the devil corrupts them. I am a freak, evil and vile and sinful.” He snarled, more at himself than Alfred.

Al just laughed, shaking his head. “Dude, you need a new church. The one you’ve been going to is obviously cracked. No one who really believes what Jesus taught would preach hate and vitriol from the pulpit. Go to church with Liz, her pastor priest thingy is real swell.”

“Elizaveta is Catholic, Alfred. I will not go to a Catholic church.” He scrunched up his nose in distaste.

“Just go talk to the guy, you butt!” Alfred huffed, punching him on the arm. Ivan shot him a glare, rubbing his arm and returning the hit.

“I cannot very well go and talk to a priest in Liza’s church while we are on a mission.” Ivan reminded him, sighing. “And any other church I go to will just tell me the same thing my church does. That I am a vile, evil sinner with the devil in me.” Which was true, as far as Ivan was concerned.

“Then go after, dude. You shouldn’t have to feel like you’re a horrible person just for being who you are.” Alfred murmured. Then, because things were getting a bit too friendly for his liking, added, “Even if who you are is an asshole. But shit, assholes can be gay, too.”

“Thank you so much for your words of kindness.” Ivan drawled sarcastically, rolling his eyes. Trust Alfred to ruin anything they might have had going. Anything platonic, of course. Even if Ivan somehow came to the conclusion that it was okay to be...as he was, he still wouldn’t seek out a relationship. Not with the bruises on Alfred’s throat still forming.

“Just get in the car, asshole. We still need to pick up groceries before we go back to the house. I’m not waking up to another morning with nothing good for breakfast. A man needs

to eat in the morning, dammit!” He grumbled, shoving himself off the ground and holding a hand to help Ivan up.

Ivan eyed it warily, only taking it after a long moment of contemplation and trying to pull his hand away as soon as he was up. But Alfred’s grip was as strong as steel and locked onto him. He looked into those eyes, hard as diamond with a look in them Ivan couldn’t place. The closest he could come was determination, but even that was wrong.

“Hey, we got that out of our systems, finally confronted the beast head on and...I want to propose a truce.” He nodded, that same steel in his gaze. Ivan watched him closely, every flicker of emotion and twitch of his face to see if Alfred was trying to trick him before nodding and shaking the hand in his.

“I accept. We will need to work together if we hope to get our job done. I see now that our feuding has been jeopardizing our work for some time. But no more, from now on we are no longer enemies, even if we are still not friends.” He nodded gruffly. Only then did Alfred let him withdraw his arm and climb into the car.

As they drove off towards the grocery store, Ivan could only think about how nothing felt different and yet, at the same time, nothing was the same.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Oh wow! I can't believe I actually finished this thing this fast and wrote it this long! I only started this chapter maybe 2-3 weeks ago and it's almost 5,000 words!

Also, I'm really sorry I haven't updated in a while, life's been hectic!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Alfred hummed softly to himself as he unlocked the front door of the safe house, a bag of groceries balanced on his hip. He hiked them up, nudging the door open with his foot and stepped over the threshold, picking the other bag of groceries that he'd set down on the doorstep up and carrying them inside. Ivan brought in two more bags, the brown paper kind. Alfred had insisted, wanting to recycle them rather than having a bunch of plastic bags they might not find an occasion to use while they were here.

The shopping trip had been a strange experience, and they'd gotten more than a few strange looks. They'd set Ivan's nose, but his eyes were dark and puffy from the break and Alfred wouldn't be surprised if it never properly healed and stayed slightly crooked. Alfred let himself think for a moment that it would be rather fetching on him before moving on to other thoughts. He also had a bruise on his jaw and a fat lip from where Alfred's strikes had landed. Alfred, on the other hand, had those dark, finger-shaped bruises on his throat and his knuckles were bloody and bruised. They must have looked quite the sight.

But that's not why the trip had been weird. If anything, the oddness had come from how normal it felt. They walked up and down the aisles together, debating over items and comparing prices. One of them would put an item in the basket and, every so often, the other would obstinately take it out, resulting in a mini staring contest until one or the other backed down. The vitriol and hatred that had hung between them like a thick, black cloud was gone now, and in its place there was only a sort of calm complacency. They weren't friends, they certainly weren't lovers, but they weren't enemies anymore, either. They just...were.

Honestly, Alfred was fine with that. He was more than fine with it, really. He didn't think he was ready to be friends with the guy. He'd seemed so broken after their fight and it made him think that maybe, that's what Ivan wanted too. Everything had just been happening all at once in a huge display of gunpowder blasts and fistfights. He wasn't even sure how it had all

happened. One day they hated each other as per usual, then suddenly they were fucking and now....it was all so draining.

He guessed it was the stress of everything. He'd always suspected that Ivan was gay and he knew that on his side there's always been latent desires, so it didn't really surprise him that when they were put under pressure, they went off like a powder keg. It was a good thing they'd gotten it out of the way. Hopefully teamwork and police work would both be easier for them now that everything was said and done.

Ivan, on the other hand, felt lost. The normalcy of shopping with Alfred had sometimes been too much and at one point he'd had to head out and wait in the car. It made his heart ache, how natural it felt to shop for groceries with another man. It was like Satan was taunting him with everything he'd secretly wanted to test his faith. He'd never considered how normal life could be, even for someone like him. He'd just assumed he would always stay and take care of his sisters. And when they got married and moved out, he would live alone for the rest of his life. But suddenly, another option was being laid out in front of him and it took everything in him not to hope that one day, he could find someone to share these experiences with for the real, instead of playing at a normal life with Alfred.

He took the groceries to the kitchen, trailing behind Alfred like a kicked puppy. He shooed Alfred away with the excuse that Alfred had to clean and bandage his knuckles and tried not to think too hard about the trip to the grocery store, focusing instead on the physical pain on his broken nose and other injuries. How would they explain that to Mei Li and her crew?

He decided, on a split second whim, to make lunch for the two of them. That would be something nice, wouldn't it? To apologize for overreacting and wallowing in his own self-pity. Alfred wouldn't let him apologize with words, every time he tried Alfred stilled his words with a dismissive wave of his hand. But Ivan had to do something, or he felt like he'd go insane.

When Alfred came back into the kitchen to check on Ivan, he was chopping up some vegetables, water boiling in a large pot on the stove. Somehow, Alfred knew what this was about, but he wasn't going to say anything. If Ivan wanted to cook dinner and run himself ragged over some weird sense of guilt for getting beaten up, let him. At least Alfred got a nice, home-cooked meal that he didn't have to cook and that didn't come with the customary social interaction with his crazy-ass family.

“What’s for dinner?” He asked, leaning up against the door frame. Ivan glanced at him momentarily before returning back to chopping the vegetables with a level of skill that caught Alfred by surprise. He looked like he really knew what he was doing.

“Chicken noodle soup. It is cold outside.” He answered, moving the potato he’d been chopping to the side and picking up some fresh green beans instead. It would be nice to have a garden to get vegetables out of, like he did at home. He had insisted that they buy all of their produce fresh rather than canned or cooked. He couldn’t stand eating anything that had been canned unless he’d done it himself.

“Oh shit, man. You know, there’s a fireplace in the living room. I’m gonna go try to scrounge up some logs for a fire. We can have a proper fall night, you know? I picked up some cider, too, the hard stuff.” Alfred grinned, suddenly taken with the idea of an evening in front of the fire with something alcoholic that tasted like fall. He’d prefer to spend it at home with his family or some booty call, instead of Ivan, but it might be a good thing for them to spend time together when they weren’t either fighting or recklessly pawing at each other.

Ivan merely nodded, taking the vegetables and dumping them in the pot. “Alright, then, go find some wood and I will make dinner.” He grunted, still wanting to shut out how normal and natural this felt. Not necessarily with Alfred himself, he told himself, but with a man period. Every minute it grew harder and harder to not want something like this for himself, this kind of domestic tranquility. He pushed the thoughts away again, concentrating on the pain in his face and the task of cutting and seasoning the chicken.

Alfred had scurried outside eagerly, looking for logs like a kid looking for Easter eggs. There was a big log in the back yard and the tools for splitting them, but coming across firewood seemed to be a little more difficult. He thought to himself that they really should keep this place stocked with firewood if they were going to be keeping people here throughout the fall and winter.

Finally he found a few logs in the shed and got to splitting them, the thud of the axe going through the wood ringing throughout the back yard. Alfred hadn’t had an occasion to split logs since his grandparents had died, their farm laying abandoned upstate until one of the boys or their father decided they wanted to use it for something. Alfred had taken dates up there a few times, but every time it felt like they were intruding on something sacred that only family should see, so he’d stopped.

He split a good amount of wood, almost all of what he found, putting the rest back into the shed. His shoulders ached in a satisfying way and after everything that had happened today, he felt like this was exactly what he'd needed. He took the logs into the house, feeling optimistic about that night and how things were going. He started the fire up in the den, grinning at the toasty warm feeling that filled the room immediately, even before the actual heat could spread out. There was just something about a fire roaring in the fireplace that made everything just feel homey.

Ivan had watched the whole thing through the kitchen window while the chicken cooked, unable to tear himself away from the sight of Alfred splitting logs like it was something he did every day, something he enjoyed. He hated himself for it, but he wanted...he wasn't even sure. There was just this feeling of longing in his chest for some vague idea of a life that felt like this.

He'd pulled himself away to save his sanity, deciding to make up some sugar cookie dough to surprise Alfred. He seemed like the kind of person who would want warm, fresh cookies on a night like this. He seemed like the kind of person who would want any kind of cookies at any given moment. He wished he had a bread maker somewhere. There was nothing better on a cold night than a few thick slices of fresh, homemade bread, but he didn't feel like going through all of the work of baking it in the oven. That would take too long, anyway.

As soon as the cookies were in the oven, he washed his hands and lingered on the threshold between the kitchen and the living room, feeling like he was intruding even though all Alfred was doing was sitting happily in front of the fire, warming his hands.

Ivan realized then that he didn't know what to do with himself now that the hate was gone. Everything between them felt empty and raw. He wasn't sure how to proceed now that he wasn't expected to constantly berate and insult the other man. He felt like he was back in high school, in that awkward phase of his life when he was slightly chubby and could barely speak in front of people.

Alfred smiled when he turned to Ivan and it only confused him more. Alfred never smiled at him, it was impossible. For Ivan there had only ever been scowls and snarled curses. "Hey, big guy, what's shakin'?" He asked, patting the floor beside him. "You don't have to stand there all night, come sit by the fire." He offered. And even though he was being nice, Ivan felt like that was the cruelest thing the younger man had ever said to him.

Still, he sat down, holding himself almost as if he expected Alfred to lash out and hit him again, or for everything to suddenly revert to how it had always been. Everything about this situation scared him in deep, disconcerting ways. And he hated himself for being scared because there was no real reason to be. It was just that everything felt so normal and he knew it wasn't. There was a sick sense of dread about everything, as if someone was just waiting for him to grow accustomed to this, only to bring hellfire and brimstone down upon him. Maybe he did need to go to that church.

Alfred looked over at him and sighed, rolling his eyes and laying back on the floor, staring up at the ceiling. "You look like you expect me to bite you." He scoffed. "I won't, you know. Not unless you ask, at least." He grinned, trying to lighten the mood with a joke. Instead, Ivan looked like he'd been struck for a moment before sinking back in on himself. "Jesus, dude! It was a joke, c'mon. It's not that bad, us not fighting." He whispered that last part, in case someone was listening in.

Ivan opened his mouth to say something, but found that he wasn't quite sure what to say. How could he explain to Alfred why he felt this way, when it was irrational in the first place. He'd never understand, because he was so shameless about his own sexuality. And how could he tell Alfred that he made him want a normal life someday himself? He would take that the wrong way and be really weirded out. "I know what to do when we are fighting." He said finally. "I do not know what to do now that we are not." And that was at least partially true, and Alfred accepted it with a nod.

"It's been too long since we got along, I get it. It's not like this is some natural transition for me, either. But, you know, I'm trying. And that's all we can really do. Don't you want to know what its like to not be fighting with someone 24/7? Not to mention how much better our work is going to go now that we're not at each other's throats." He tried to reason with him, laying out all the pros to their situation.

Ivan simply nodded and tried to relax, though something in the way he held himself still seemed a little stiff. He was relieved when the timer on the cookie went out, giving him an excuse to leave the room. The cookies turned out beautifully and the chicken wasn't too far from done, either. He would add the meat to the now simmering soup as soon as it was done and serve it up.

He stayed in the kitchen, rather than returning to Alfred in the living room. He couldn't shake the feeling that at any moment the other shoe would drop and he'd be left standing in the ruins of their partnership, potentially in danger of being unmasked as undercover cops.

However, once the timer went off for the chicken and he added the pieces of meat to the stew, he had no choice but to call Alfred in for dinner, relinquishing his sanctuary, probably for the rest of the night, if Alfred's insistence on getting drunk in the front room was any indication.

They ate in relative silence, only speaking up to ask for something to be passed. For Alfred the silence was nigh on companionable, but for Ivan it was hell, a sort of reversal of their usual dynamic. He was glad, however, that Alfred's eyes lit up with excitement when he brought out the cookies. He couldn't say why, exactly, but it made him feel a bit better about the whole situation.

Only once they'd retired to the living room to sit in front of the fire with their hard cider did Ivan finally relax. Alcohol had always had that kind of effect on him. It was why, in his young adulthood between high school and the force, he'd been somewhat of an alcoholic, trying to dull his awkward and/or violent tendencies with booze. But he could control himself better now and a few drinks after dinner certainly wouldn't hurt.

Only, it wasn't just a few drinks after dinner. Alfred had bought a huge jug of the cider and every time Ivan finished his drink, Alfred would insist on pouring him another, both of their faces flushed from the drink and their laughter growing louder with every round. It was like it had been in those first few months they'd worked together, when they could be friends and go out for drinks and just have fun.

It was a few hours past dinner and quickly nearing midnight when an extremely drunk Alfred turned to Ivan, eyes serious and unfocused, and asked the hardest question Ivan had ever had to answer.

"Why did you hate me so much, dude? I don't..." He lurched a bit, "I don't remember doing anything to you. Like...the first time we fought, it caught me by complete surprise! It was like...all of a sudden you had a bee in your bonnet and just...you kept picking all these fights and eventually I just started fighting back. What was your goddamned problem?" He frowned, or rather, he pouted. When he was drunk, Alfred had a tendency to regress back to a form of immaturity.

Ivan was speechless, just staring at Alfred like he'd grown an extra head or something. It had been so long since this all started that it was hard to put into words exactly what his problem

had been. He knew, of course, but it was harder to put it into words, to jettison it into the world and make it real in a way he'd never wanted to.

So Ivan just shook his head and shrugged, laying back and staring up at the ceiling. "I can't really remember. Something about you just made me angry all the time." He sighed. Alfred snorted and pushed his shoulder.

"That's fucking bullshit, man. Don't feed me that dumbass...uhm...bullshit." He frowned at him again. "C'mon, really, tell me. Why did you hate me so much? I promise I won't get mad at you or anything." He crossed his heart, looking proud of himself as he grinned down at the other man.

"I wanted to kiss you." He blurted out, too drunk to even panic over what he'd said. He closed his eyes and sighed. "You...you were so bright, intellectually and...you know, your personality. You were nice to me, at first, too. And I liked that. No one...not a lot of people were nice to me before you. The world is so cruel, children especially. And there was this... well, it's still there...there's this hardness, this...I don't know how to say it in English, I'm too drunk. You're a very special person and I hated myself for...for..." He stopped then, choked up and curling over on his side. "Forget it, I don't want to talk about this anymore." He grunted.

Alfred had sat and listened to all of this in amazement. So Ivan had had a crush on him, huh? That was kinda cute, actually. If the stupid prick hadn't been so up in arms about how unnatural and sinful being gay was, that could have gone somewhere. It was probably too late now, and Alfred was fine with that, but it was a nice thought, at least.

He crawled over to Ivan and draped himself across his side, blinking blearily at him for a moment before poking his nose and saying 'boop', then dissolving into giggles. "C'mere, dude." He laughed. "No, seriously, c'mere." He dragged Ivan back up to a sitting position, looking him in the eyes. "You know...I know you're all beat up about being gay and all." Ivan flinched at the use of that term to describe him, but Alfred went on. "But I mean, look. It's not as bad as all that. Look how much progress has been made, look at how many people are on your side. The fact that there are churches you can go to, Catholic churches, even, that will accept and love you for who you are says a lot. You don't have to be afraid anymore, you don't have to worry about what people will think. And you know what? I bet your sister already knows." He nodded sagely. "That's how things like that work, your family usually knows even before you come out to them. She's probably just waiting until you feel okay enough to tell her. She obviously still loves you, and you're obviously really close. Hell, I thought when I came out that my dad and Arthur were gonna beat me bloody and kick me out

on the street. But did they? Hell fucking no they didn't! My dad was positively thrilled.” Alfred snorted, rolling his eyes affectionately. “He was so glad I'd never come home and tell him I'd gotten a girl pregnant that he took us all out to dinner to celebrate that night. Took off of work and everything.” Alfred sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “I guess what I'm saying is...you're not alone. And you don't have to feel ashamed. And that...you could have kissed me if you wanted to.”

Ivan just blinked at him, barely comprehending what had just happened. He'd had quite a bit to drink, which was the only explanation he had for why he leaned in and pressed his lips chastely to Alfred's. It didn't linger and there was no heat in it. It was simply a quick peck and he was gone, like he'd never even done it.

“I-I'm sorry!” He stammered out, blushing profusely and scrambling back. “I just...I just didn't...I didn't want to regret not having done that.” He mumbled. Alfred merely grinned and shrugged.

“No problem, big guy, I completely understand. And look, you ever need someone to talk to, I'm here for you. We may not really be friends, but I understand what it's like to feel so alone that everything you think you can't have makes you angry. So just...don't shut me out anymore, kay?” He asked.

Ivan nodded dumbly, still holding himself like he expected to be chastised. “I think...I think I will go to bed now. I am very drunk and I do not trust myself under the scrutiny of these cameras.” He said slowly, his Russian accent starting to come out as he slurred his words. Alfred nodded and got up himself.

“Here, let me help you. I should probably get to bed myself, I'm pretty fucking beat. And who knows what's going to happen tomorrow, really. Mei Li might swing by to check up on us or give us another assignment, and we don't want to be caught still sleeping it off.” He grinned and helped Ivan up, yawning and stretching and trailing after the larger man as he climbed the stairs.

It only took a few minutes for Ivan to fall asleep that night, but in those few minutes, everything seemed to solidify and make sense and he knew, even if he'd blown any chance he had with Alfred a long time ago, that maybe that normal life that had been haunting him all day wasn't as out of reach as he thought.

[illegible]

“I love the snow.” Alfred sighed wistfully, gazing out of the window onto the windswept, leaf-covered back yard. He liked the way their relationship had lapsed out of the frankly tiring, constant barrage of hatred and snark into something quieter. It was still very stiff and neither of them seemed to know what to do or say, but it was less that they were forcibly staying stiff and more that they barely knew each other, really.

Ivan didn’t answer him, but Alfred didn’t mind. He just clutched his coffee cup in his hands and looked out of the window, blue eyes fading to nearly grey like the color of the sky outside as he stared into it, wishing for snow.

When the knock came at the door, it was Ivan who was the first up, leaving the pensive young man at the kitchen table and going to answer it. When he opened it, there stood Mei Li in her business-like LBD with her two companions flanking her.

“Hello, Robert.” She greeted, something in her smile setting off alarm bells in his head.

“Hello, Mei Li. What can I do for you?” He asked, not stepping out of the doorway.

She didn’t answer, merely clicking her fingers. Ivan growled and slammed the door shut as Im Yong Soo and the other man came at him, taking off through the living room. He found Alfred still at the kitchen table, but he was alert now, suspicious.

“What happened?” He asked.

“No time to explain, Mei Li and her men have seen fit to attack.” He snarled. Alfred sprang into action immediately, knocking the table down to act as a barrier and drawing his gun.

“Fuck me!” He cursed, a snarl forming on his face as the three of them came into the kitchen with ropes and their pistols. Alfred took a shot and hit Im Yong in the shoulder, but they kept coming. He took another shot and hit the other man in the thigh, but still they didn’t stop.

He tried to level a shot at Mei Li, but his gun merely clicked, out of ammo. Had he forgotten to reload it? He had thought he'd checked the entire thing the other night just to make sure everything was in working order.

This whole time Ivan had been searching frantically for his own pistol, but it was nowhere to be found. He'd set it down the night before when they were drunk, not trusting himself, considering his train of thought that night.

Ivan's eyes widened as Mei Li held up his pistol, smirking, and Im Yong Soo emptied a handful of bullets from one of his pockets. Alfred cursed and took a step back, fists up in preparation to fight for his life as he tried to inch back towards the sliding glass doors leading out to the back yard.

"Not so fast~" Mei Li trilled, smirking even wider as two more goons they hadn't even seen came out behind them through the glass doors and grabbed Alfred. He struggled, but the man was much larger than him, about Ivan's size.

Ivan snarled and lept for the woman, only to be grabbed by two more men even larger than he was. He kicked and struggled desperately, but their grips were like iron. He didn't even see the blackjack coming, didn't realize what was happening until the world went black. His last thoughts were that if he was going to die here and now, he was glad he didn't have to die without settling things with Alfred.

Alfred cried out as he saw Ivan go limp from the strike, his struggle renewing with even greater intensity. But something, a sack, he supposed, was shoved over his head and his hands tied before he met the same fate as Ivan had, unconscious and limp in the large man's arms.

Chapter End Notes

Well there you go! I tried to address some of the issues you guys had with how fast their "relationship" was developing. I mean, the intention was that it wasn't actually developing jack shit and it was more that when you put fire and gunpowder together, something's bound to explode. But there you go.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Smoke curled up and away from the lone figure standing on the corner of the street at 2:30 in the morning. The red flare of a lit cigarette butt arced through the air, landing in the river. The night was clear, the sky cloudless and dotted with stars. The street was deserted, save this lone person.

Dark eyes scanned the empty street, right hand on the gun concealed underneath the heavy coat the young man wore. He was Asian, a teen or perhaps in his early 20s, with a solemn expression and sharp eyes that took in every detail, waiting for the signal from the other half of this clandestine meeting.

There it came, from an alley 2 blocks down: the flash of a woman's compact mirror. Casually, the young man pushed himself off of the railing and strolled down the street. Ducking into the alleyway, he was greeted with a woman in a black dress.

“Leon Chun, how good to see you.” The woman greeted, leaning up against the wall. He wasn't fooled by the casual pose. It was the laziness of a predator that didn't feel the need to be on their guard. Leon knew all too well what kind of a threat this woman posed.

He drew his attention to the manila folder she held in one arm, the reason he was here.

“Mei Li, it's been a long time.” He nodded back, not taking his eyes off of the folder. “How is the Rising Sun treating you?” He asked, the seemingly casual comment carrying a deceptive bite.

“No worse than the Red Dragons.” She shrugged, a return barb. Leon let it go.

“What do you want for it, Mei?” He asked, cutting to the chase.

“You mean this?” She gestured with the folder. “Just a little information I know you already have. You won't have to do any real work.” She smirked, unable to resist the last taunt.

“Let's talk business.” Leon said coolly, ignoring the jab.

[illegible]

Leon pulled the brim of his hat low over his eyes as the rain started back up, shielding his face from the downpour. He shrugged deeper into his trench coat as he hurried across the street to a modest-looking office building on the edge of Chinatown. From the outside, it looked like the legitimate corporate HQ of a small shipping and transportation company. Inside, Yao Wang and his associates conducted a different kind of business entirely.

He opened the door for a little old lady who regularly sold gossip for oxy. He tipped his hat to her as she opened her umbrella, then ducked inside the building. The first two floors were

clean, for the most part. The first floor was a legitimate shipping company that was a shell for their smuggling operations. The second was a payday loan company that charged extra interest under the table.

Leon took the elevator straight for the third floor.

He was met with a reinforced steel door with a peep hole at eye level. The bolt on the peep hole slid open with a clink, and the doorman looked through.

“Ni hao, Leon. Come on through.” He greeted. Usually there was a password of some sort, but Leon was too well-known and too high up the chain to bother with that shit. He slipped through the door and took off down the hallway, towards Yao's office.

The light level on this floor was lower, more sensual. This floor was where they seedy underbelly of Chinatown came to do their business. Instead of desks, many of the offices had beds for the johns and the drug-addled. Big, burly men stood looking menacing in the corners, while young, lithe women flitted around the room looking for business among the junkies strung out on various drugs.

Yao's office was the last door at the end of the hall. The window in the door had been replaced with thick bullet-proof glass, and it was bolted on the other side by a heavy steel bar wider than the door and twice as thick.

Here, the security was tighter. A retinal scanner controlled the bolt on the door, allowing access only to a select few. Leon stared into the device and waited for the bolt to slide out of place before opening the door and slipping into the office.

“Leon, good to see you.” Yao greeted, looking up from a stack of papers. “I was just about to call you in to ask about the incident at the club.”

“It was handled. The guy was drunk and didn't know what he was doing. No harm, in the end.” Leon assured him.

“Good, good. I trust he's been suspended from the establishment for a while?” He asked, adjusting his reading glasses.

“Yes, he's been told not to come back for 3 weeks. And that if there's another incident, we won't be so kind.” He nodded, thumbing the folder.

“What's that?” Yao asked, looking up from his papers again, gesturing to the folder.

“Some new information I think you'll find quite interesting.” Leon smirked, laying the folder open on his desk and pushing it towards him. Yao's brow furrowed as he picked it up, looking through the pictures and documents within.

“Oh yes, this is interesting. Very interesting, indeed.” Yao drawled, a smirk mirroring Leon's growing on his face. “Take a few men and investigate this matter. I want to know more before we make a move.” He commanded, waving Leon off with one hand.

“Consider it done.” Leon agreed, turning on his heel and striding out of the room.

[illegible]

“Jaime?” Ivan’s voice came from somewhere behind him. “Are you ok?”

“My head hurts like a bitch and I’m all tied up. Great for the morning after, not so great after a kidnapping.” He joked, hissing as his goose egg throbbed. “You?”

“I’m in the same boat you are, plus I’m still hungover. Things aren’t looking great.” He sighed, a shuffling noise reaching Alfred’s ears. Moments later, he felt the press of Ivan’s shoulder against his, a reassuring warmth in the darkness.

“Shit.” He cursed, trying to loosen his bonds. “What are we gonna do? We really stepped in it this time.” He growled as the ropes refused to slacken, giving up after a few minutes of useless effort. His mind set to work, trying to come up with a way to get them out of this. But with his head covered and his hands tied, what could he do?

“We don't even know what they want with us.” Ivan pointed out. Though the sinking feeling that they had been found out weighed heavily in both of their chests. Alfred pressed a little closer to Ivan, glad that he wasn't alone in this, at least.

At least they'd cleared the air between them. They could go down as partners, if it came to that. He just wished he had time to say goodbye to his family. They were all in law and law enforcement, they knew the risk any time one of them left for work. But knowing something could happen and having to deal with the reality were two completely different beasts.

He wished Emily was here.

Ivan's thoughts were on his sisters, and the promise he had made to Natalia. She would be devastated, and Katyusha was holding on by such a thin margin, herself. Without him, would they even make it? Katyusha could barely work, she'd tried holding down odd jobs since they'd come to America, but her depression and frequent crying fits had cost her every one. What would happen to them if he was found tomorrow, body unceremoniously dumped in the river?

"We'll get through this." Alfred assured him quietly, a calm conviction in his voice. It made Ivan feel better about their situation, even if he didn't quite believe his partner.

“Of course we will, Jay. We always make it through.” He answered back, trying to put some bravado in his voice when there wasn't much to be found.

Voices filtered in through the doors of wherever they were being held, low murmurs that they couldn't put to names or faces. Alfred's mind raced, trying to come up with a plan. Maybe if they rushed them as soon as they opened the door? But how would they know when and

where to rush with their heads covered? And they wouldn't know how many there were, or where to run once they were free.

They were trapped.

“Jay, baby, listen. We gotta just do what they say. We'll think of something, but for now we've got no action to take. They've got us backed into a corner.” Ivan said, voice low and close to Alfred's ear. Alfred nodded, leaning against Ivan for a moment for reassurance.

“Rob? If...if we don't make it out...” He started, biting his lip.

“Jaime, baby, don't. We'll make it.” He murmured, wishing he could be more sure of that.

“No, listen. If we don't make it, I just want you to know I'm sorry. And that I wish we could have had more time to fix things.” He sighed, laying his covered head on Ivan's shoulder.

“Me too, Jay. But we'll have time. We'll fix it, and we'll go home.” He assured him, trying to believe it himself.

“I miss my brothers.” He whispered, only for Ivan to hear. “Mattie...I can't leave him.”

“Natalia...I promised her I would be back. She's only 9 years old, and she's already lost so much.” Ivan hung his head. “I can't imagine what my death would do to her.”

“We can't let it end like this.” Alfred growled, snarling into the darkness. “We can't go down without a fight.”

“We won't.” Ivan promised, hands clenching behind his back where they were tied.

A metallic sound filtered in as a heavy latch or bolt was lifted and the doors flung open. Two sets of large, strong hands grabbed each of them and hauled them out. The bags were ripped off of their heads, leaving them both blinking owlishly in the sun.

The two goons that had grabbed them at the house flanked them on either side, with two more settling in behind them to bring up the rear. Before them stood Mei and Soo, the former staring them down while the latter nonchalantly smoked a cigarette, staring off into the distance.

They were in the middle of a field, with nothing to be seen for a mile in any direction. The soil was bare, the air cold and crisp, the wind biting despite the shining sun. Soo tossed his cigarette butt to the side and cut a glance at them, the corners of his lips twitching upwards in a faint smirk.

Alfred's heart pounded in his chest and ears, so loud he was sure that everyone in the field could hear it. He stood close to Ivan, eyes darting around between the people surrounding them. He assessed his options and came up empty. There was a slim chance that they could fight their way free, but their mission would be forfeit before they even knew what was going on.

“What the fuck, Mei!” He snarled. “You tell us what in god's name is going on here right now, or I will make things as painful for you as possible.” He threatened. Mei, to her credit, chuckled and shook her head.

“Sorry about the rough housing, boys. Its easier to keep you from trying to track where we're taking you when you're down for the count. Plus, its a good way to test you.” She smirked. Ivan wondered idly if they had passed.

“So where did you take us?” Ivan asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Untie them.” Was all she said, and two of the men (Alfred swore they were all taller than Ivan, somehow, and built like brick shit houses, besides) moved to do just that. The pair rubbed at their wrists to get the circulation flowing again, still wary of Mei and her crew.

“Walk with us.” She commanded, and Alfred noticed for the first time that the classy dress and heels she seemed to prefer in the city had been replaced by jeans and sturdy boots. How long were they going to be walking? He glanced at Ivan, who gave him a perturbed look then shrugged and moved to follow Mei. Alfred fell into step beside him, catching his hand and squeezing it briefly. Whatever happened, they weren't alone. Ivan squeezed back, and they dropped their hands.

Across the field, through a copse of trees, over a creek, across another field, down into a ravine, over a river, and back up the other side, they finally came up behind an old farm house, the windows shining in the creeping darkness following the rapidly setting sun. Alfred, shivering and huddled up against Ivan for warmth, heaved a sigh of relief.

Mei led them to the back door and knocked out a rapid, seemingly erratic beat. A moment later and there came the click of a lock being undone. Mei opened it and led them inside, Ivan and the overly large men stooping to fit through.

They stepped into a spacious kitchen done in cheery yellow shades, with gingham curtains and a row of gleaming pots and pans hanging above the sink. Alfred frowned, wondering if this was another safe house, or what. Why would they bring them here? And why such secrecy?

They were led out of the kitchen and across the hallway to the top of the basement stairs. Alfred paused for a moment, picturing clean metal surfaces covered with plastic to catch all of the blood. But one of the goons bumped Ivan into him and it was descend or fall. So he took the stairs one at a time, not stalling, but not exactly jogging down, either. Ivan came down behind him, a hand on his shoulder.

At the bottom of the stairs he was greeted not with a plastic-covered murder lab, but a well-stocked rec room. A large flat screen TV was mounted to one wall above an entertainment center stuffed full of movies, tv shows, and video games. What in the hell was this place? And why were they here?

A young Asian man, no older than Alfred, rose from the gaming chair stationed in front of the television, a look of cold indifference on his face. A well-tailored suit, all crisp hems and

sleek lines, and an expensive watch completed the picture of a powerful man, perhaps a ruthless one; the gun at his hip spoke volumes.

He stopped in front of them and slipped his hands into his pockets, taking out a pack of cigarettes and fishing one out. Striking a match and lighting it, the man began to speak.

“I was hoping you would put up a better fight.” He hummed, looking slightly disappointed. “You two have been some of the more entertaining guests we've had.” He chuckled, hitting a few buttons on a remote. The video feed from the house they had been staying in popped up on the screen.

It was footage from the night they had spent in front of the fire, sorting things out. They had been pressed close to each other, murmuring softly so the mics couldn't pick anything up. From this angle, it looked intimate. Breathing in the same space in front of a roaring fire, drinks nearby; it looked a lot more romantic than it had been in context. Then Ivan kissed him.

Honestly, Ivan had been particularly worried about this conversation in hindsight. Had they overheard anything? Been suspicious of them? Was that why they were here? But looking at the footage now, he couldn't see anything that would give them pause. They had unknowingly played their parts, even in that recklessly unguarded moment. He let out a sigh of relief inwardly.

Outwardly he frowned at the video. “We're so glad we could provide some distraction, Mr. Honda.” He drawled sardonically, staring him down. “But I think we should get to the matter at hand. If you aren't going to kill us, then get to why you did bring us here.”

“Robby.” Alfred admonished. “Don't get your panties in a bunch, babe. If they want to try to intimidate us, let 'em.” He shrugged, an easy grin on his face screaming 'It's not like its going to work, anyway'.

Ivan drew Alfred into his arms and held him tight. “They could have hurt you.” He growled, clutching him close.

“But they didn't. Well, they did, but a bump on my head ain't shit. I'm fine, promise. I know you wouldn't have let anything happen to me.” He cooed, pressing a kiss to his cheek.

“Now,” He said, turning to Honda, Mei, and Soo. “He does have a point. The faster we get down to business, the faster we all go home safe and happy, yeah?”

“Of course.” Honda agreed, waving an idle hand at Mei, who crossed the room to fetch a map, which she rolled out onto the table. It was a map of the docks, a few positions and the exits all marked.

“The Vargas brothers have called a meeting with Yao in a warehouse down by the docks. It's the best chance that's come up so far. There's only a few ways to get to the warehouse without taking a long walk off a short pier. Two sides border a steep, rocky bank, and two face a maze of shipping containers. Everyone will have to come in the same way, through the shipping yard. If we play our cards right, we might even be able to make it look like the Italians called in the hit.” Mei started, while Honda made a few marks on his map with a red marker.

“We've set up a choke point here, in the maze of shipping containers between the docks and this warehouse.” Honda explained, showing them on the map as he spoke. “We've also set up something similar on the other side, in case he comes from that way. We suspect, however, that he'll come through from the dockside. Finnegan, you'll be up on the roof with your sniper rifle, waiting for a clear shot. Delacoeur, You'll be on the ground, in case things get messy. We don't expect things to get messy.” He smirked.

“Once you've taken the shot, retreat.” He told Alfred. “I don't care if you hit him or not, retreat after the first shot. And whatever you do, none of his men see your face, got it? I want plausible deniability.” He stressed.

“Everyone will know you hired someone, but they won't know who and they won't be able to prove it, so they won't say shit?” Alfred asked, a grin like a knife's edge cutting across his face.

“Exactly.” Honda chuckled, rolling up the map.

“We'll talk more when the time comes.” Mei assured them. “For now, we should all rest. It's a long walk back to the van tomorrow morning.” Alfred gave her a horrified look, and she chuckled, shaking her head.

“You really thought we went through all of the trouble of walking you here just to drive you back?” She snorted, Alfred glared at her, clenching his hand into a fist. Ivan just pulled him into an embrace from behind, pressing his lips to his ear.

“Calm down, babe. It's only a few miles.” He chuckled softly. “You can do it.” He teased.

“Sometimes I hate you.” Alfred pouted, though he didn't break the embrace. Soo made a gagging noise and rolled his eyes.

“Get a fucking room, you two.” He snorted. Alfred blinked, wondering if that was the first time the man had spoken to them. He thought maybe it was.

“Gladly, I'm fuckin' beat.” He yawned, rubbing his eyes tiredly. “Got any spares?” He asked Kiku.

“Yeah. Daisuke, show them to a room.” He ordered, and one of the overly large men stepped out of the lineup and motioned for them to follow. They trailed behind him to the second floor, which seemed to be nothing but bedrooms. They were unceremoniously, but not unkindly dumped into one by the bruiser, and left to find their way to bed themselves.

Alfred flopped face first into the bed as soon as the door was shut behind them, toeing off his shoes and wiggling into a more comfortable position. “Jesus fucking Christ it has been a long-ass day.” He groaned, face buried in a pillow.

Ivan yawned and removed his own shoes and coat, crawling into the bed beside Alfred. “You can say that again.” He rubbed a hand over his face, staring up at the ceiling. “I thought we were going to die.” He let out a long sigh.

“Yeah, me too. And now I don't know if I'm too wired to sleep, or too exhausted to stay awake.” He huffed, removing his glasses and setting them on a conveniently placed night stand. “I'm really hoping it's the latter. That's too long a walk to be taking on little to no sleep.”

“Mmm.” Ivan agreed, his own eyelids already drooping shut.

Alfred propped himself up on his elbows, watching Ivan as his eyes closed and he quickly drifted off to sleep. That had been fast. Al stuck his tongue out at the lucky bastard and flopped back down, mind whirring back through the events of the day. He wasn't sure he'd ever be able to sleep again.

And yet, 10 minutes later when Soo was sent to make sure they weren't snooping around, he found them both fast asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Hahaha I bet you guys never thought you'd see me again!

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

The trap is set, the counter trap is baited....what could go wrong?

Alfred struggled to wake the next morning, the cocoon of warmth around him threatening to pull him back into his slumber. Ivan's arm was a pleasant weight on his waist and it took him more than a moment to remember he wasn't supposed to find it pleasant and remorsefully extract himself from the bed.

At least, he tried to. But Ivan made a small, displeased sound in the back of his throat and held him tighter, pressing his nose into Alfred's neck and letting out a huff of breath before settling again. Alfred could tell by his breathing that he was still asleep, and cursed silently under his breath. He tried to lift Ivan's arm and wiggle out, but the giant Russian bastard was strong. Eventually he gave up and just started shaking him.

"Robbie, wake up!" He hissed. "I gotta pee and you're holding me down!"

Ivan blinked open violet eyes and frowned at him, looking put out at being woken up and subsequently deprived of his cuddle buddy. Eventually he just grumbled and turned over, releasing Alfred and going back to sleep.

Snorting softly under his breath, Alfred checked the doors inside the room, glad that one of them led to a bathroom. He had to piss like a racehorse and he didn't feel like prowling enemy territory and risk getting shot just for a leak. By the time he was out, Ivan was up and talking to Mei. She was still dressed casually, though she'd been given the chance to change, unlike them.

"We'll be leaving soon." She said without preamble as he slipped out of the bathroom. "We have breakfast downstairs, we'll head out when everyone's done."

Alfred nodded and slipped past her into the hallway. He was starving, and he wanted to get back to the safehouse where everything felt on a more even kilter. Where the psychopathic, murderous gangsters were just watching him and not right there in the room with guns and knives.

He heard footsteps on the stairs behind him, and he had to remind himself it was just Ivan and Mei coming down for breakfast. He didn't know how much longer he could play it cool surrounded by enemies with his nerves shot. He slid into a chair opposite the man he thought was Daisuke and served himself, eating quietly without looking up from his plate.

"What's the matter, Jaime? Not a morning person?" Im Yong Soo asked, his smirk unkind but not necessarily malicious.

"Got my throat fucked too hard last night." He rasped out with a smirk, just to fuck with him. The sick look that crossed the man's face was like music to his eyes. Beside him, Ivan snorted as he slid into his seat.

"Stop antagonizing him, Jay. Though I am curious what you actually would consider too hard." He hummed, his eyes flashing. "If you have a limit, I've never hit it."

Alfred actually blushed at that, sticking his tongue out at his partner and burying his face in his coffee. "Maybe you aren't trying hard enough." He mumbled.

Ivan remained studiously silent as he ate his eggs.

Alfred pouted and took to shovelling his food into his mouth rapidly, hoping that they could leave soon and he would be free to drop at least some of the act. It was exhausting being under this much scrutiny.

Ivan took the hint and finished quickly as well, clearing his throat to indicate to the rest of the party that they were ready to hit the road. Mei nodded to her men and things were quickly gathered up. This time, at least, Ivan and Alfred were supplied with coats to keep away the chill of the morning as they were marched back across the ravine and the fields beyond it. Alfred tried to memorize anything memorable he saw, hoping he could find his way back somehow if he needed to. But everything was so uniform, it just looked like any other stretch of rural nowhere.

By the time they got back to the truck, Alfred was ready to go back to sleep right out in the middle of the field. Obviously the sleep he'd gotten last night wasn't half as restful as it had felt before they left. He was sagging against Ivan and the taller man could tell he was about to start complaining if he didn't sit down soon.

Ivan was about to say something teasing to him about it when Mei clicked her fingers and they were dragged apart, once again held by her ridiculously large henchmen.

"What the fuck!?" Alfred demanded as he struggled against Daisuke's hold.

"Oh relax, Jaime." She said, waving her hand dismissively. "You know I can't have you two figuring out where my boss lives. You should have expected this." She chastized him as she drew two syringes out of her purse, handing one to Soo. She stepped up to Alfred and pressed the needle to his neck. "Don't struggle, it'll only make things worse." She warned him as she pressed the needle into his skin and pushed the plunger.

He had just enough time to look over and see Im Yong Soo do the same to Ivan before he was out.

When Alfred woke up, it was to the sight of the same beige ceiling he'd been waking up to for what felt like a month but was probably closer to a week. For a moment, he considered the possibility that the kidnapping and the meeting with Honda had all been an elaborate dream. But the cotton on his tongue and lingering grogginess in his limbs told him, no, he really had been drugged all to hell and tossed into the back of a truck.

He rolled over with more effort than should be necessary, relieved to find Ivan laying next to him on the bed. He tried to shake him, only to lose his balance and drive to hold himself up and end up with his arm slung around him.

"Robbie, wake up." He slurred, nudging him a bit.

"Mmmmm." Ivan groaned, rolling over under Alfred's arm to face him. "I feel like I tried to drown in a vat of vodka." He said, cracking his eyes open, unable to contain his accent.

"I feel like I got hit by a truck driven by the Sandman." Alfred agreed. "We have to get up, though. Try to walk off the rest of it. We have to make our meeting." He reminded him. As soon as they had details, they were supposed to drop them off for their handler to pick up. They had to get moving and get the information to them before the hit went down

"Fuck." Ivan hissed, rubbing a hand down his face and rolling out of bed. "I want to hurt that woman, I really do."

"You and me both." Alfred agreed, tearing himself out of the way too comfortable bed. He stretched languidly, groaning as his muscles released all the tension they'd been holding. It reminded him of the one time he'd taken painkillers recreationally in high school, groggy and heavy-limbed.

While Ivan stumbled into the shower, Alfred headed into the kitchen. It was still a mess from the night Mei and her men had grabbed them, and he set it to rights again before starting on what he was going to tentatively call dinner.

By the time Ivan drug himself out of the shower and to the kitchen table, Alfred already had coffee and hash browns ready for him, flipping his eggs onto his plate less than 5 seconds later.

"Breakfast for dinner alright?" He asked, adding a few pieces of bacon from where they had been cooling.

Ivan nodded wordlessly and dug into his food, still looking a bit out of it. Alfred turned back to the stove and let him eat. By the time he had plated his own food, Ivan had finished and was scribbling away in a notebook. A glance told Alfred he was writing up the encoded notes they'd be dropping off for their colleagues.

They sat in silence at the table while Alfred finished his breakfast and Ivan finished the report, Alfred rising silently to do the dishes when he was done. Ivan finished just as Alfred was drying his hands, and with a nod they both headed out to the car.

"Maybe we can go home soon." Alfred said as they got into the suburban. He smiled at the thought, wondering what his brothers were doing right now. Arthur was probably still at his desk. If anyone worked more than their dad, it was Arthur. Mattie would be at home, probably unwinding with a videogame. Francis worked the night shift, so unless he was off he was still at the dispatch.

It hit him that he could call any one of them. He could just dial them up and hear their voices, make sure to say goodbye in case things went South tomorrow. He could call dad, or Emily. Just to say hi, just to talk. But one phone call could get him killed and put all of them in danger. His phone was a sinking weight in his pocket.

"Don't think about home." Ivan cautioned him quietly in his flat American accent, looking up from his writing. "And don't break character until this is done. I don't like this. They should have given us a more private spot. This one is right in the middle of the entertainment district." Alfred could practically feel the tension in Ivan's voice.

"Alright, babydoll. I can do that for ya." He shrugged, leaning back and staring out the window. "It's going to be fine. We make the drop, we leave, we forget all about it until tomorrow. We'll be okay." He assured him. Ivan didn't even glance his way. He sighed and shifted in his seat, propping his head up with his hand.

They drove in silence from then on, the only sound in the car the grinding of Ivan's teeth. His knuckles were white where he clutched the wheel, and his eyes shifted every few seconds like he was afraid they were being followed. Alfred kept an eye on the cars around and behind them, but nothing stood out.

"Mill and Freeman, that's near the nightclub we shook down, right?" Alfred asked suddenly, frowning. "That won't be a problem, right?" He asked, lips pursing.

"It's unlikely. But I still don't like it. I wish they'd given us something farther from downtown." Ivan said, staring straight ahead, jaw clenched.

By the time they pulled into a familiar area, Alfred was clenching his jaw, too. They were less than three blocks from the night club where they'd beaten up that sleazy German asshole. Ivan was right, they should have been given a different drop off point.

The alley was plunged back into darkness as Ivan killed the lights and turned the car off. "Damn this mission! Damn Delacoeur, and damn me for being so recognizable!" He cursed, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"I could do it." Alfred offered, seeing how tightly Ivan was clutching the envelope. "You can stay in the car."

Ivan shook his head. "I'll do it." He said, sighing and getting out of the car. The alley stunk of trash and exhaust, the ground strangely damp. The only light came from the streetlight across from the other end. He glanced around and popped the collar of his coat, pulling the brim of his hat low over his face. He picked his way over to the large green dumpster cutting a hulking shadow against the wall. He opened it up, crinkling his nose as the smell of trash and rot increased. He rolled up his sleeves and stuck an arm in, grimacing as he felt around.

Rough synthetic fiber scratched against his fingertips and he grabbed, pulling a backpack out of the filth. It was stained with trash juice and covered in coffee grounds, and Ivan questioned the intelligence of whoever's idea this was.

He shook out the plastic bag tucked inside and put the papers inside, returning them to the backpack and shoving it under the dumpster to be retrieved. He returned to the car, making a disgusted face at his dirty hand.

"Nothing in there for us?" Alfred asked. Ivan shook his head and started the car, pulling out of the alley and heading back towards the main thoroughfare through the area. He almost seemed not to breathe as they pulled away, only taking a breath once they were well away from the dirty back alley.

Behind the dumpster, someone stirred.

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"You sure it was them?" Gilbert asked, eyeing the miserable wretch dirtying his well-maintained nightclub. Heracles Karpusi stunk of booze, trash, and unwashed ass, like usual. But he was observant, which was useful, and being homeless meant no one ever looked at him twice. A good combination for an informant.

"The only guy I've ever seen bigger than your brother, with silver blonde hair and purple eyes is kind of hard to miss. The blonde with him might have been the kid who beat you up, might not be. Lots of blondes with blue eyes and glasses in the city." Karpusi answered.

"Tell me again what they were doing?" Gilbert asked, frowning and holding the stinking backpack away from him gingerly.

"The big guy got out of the car, got this out of the dumpster, put those papers inside, tossed the bag under the dumpster, and left." Karpusi shrugged. "It was all really spy vs spy."

Gilbert shuffled through the papers again, his frown deepening. What the hell were these things? They were covered in symbols he'd never seen, like some kind of arcane manuscript. He half expected to find a spell to summon the dead if he got it cracked.

"It's something, I guess. I don't know what, but it's sure...something." Gilbert sighed, tossing a roll of money at the man. He'd brought him something very intriguing, for all that he had no idea what to do with it. He'd earned his pay.

Heracles squirreled away the money in a flash, thanking him and leaving Gilbert to stare at the papers.

He sighed and turned on the lights, taking his glasses from his pocket and sitting down to a table. This was going to be a long night.

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The alarm clock went off at 11 pm on the dot, waking Alfred immediately. Ivan rose as well, though it was obvious he still hated waking up. He grabbed Ivan's sidearm and handed it to

him, grabbing his sniper rifle and checking it over. He wouldn't be putting it together right now, but he didn't want it to jam just when he needed it.

"Ready?" Ivan asked, having checked his own weapon and holstered it. His face was grave, but calm. It bolstered Alfred, steadying his hands where they had been shaking slightly on his rifle. Ivan laid a warm hand on his shoulder and Alfred took a galvanizing breath.

"Let's go." Ivan said simply, turning to leave. Alfred packed up his rifle, the case disguised as a trumpet case, and followed behind.

"You remember the plan?" He asked as soon as they were in the car. Ivan nodded.

"We head to our posts as Honda ordered. Once the Vargases, the Red Dragons, and the Rising Sun are in place, you fire off a shot at Wang. That's the signal for the police. They sweep in and round up whoever doesn't get caught in the ensuing crossfire, and we go home." He recited. They'd gone over the plan again that afternoon before they went to bed, both cursing the fact that they had so little time to prepare.

"Right." Alfred said, clutching the steering wheel in an iron tight grip as he pulled out of the driveway and headed to the docks. They were silent the whole ride, the tension in the car thick enough to cut with a knife.

They were both still on edge as they slipped into position, Alfred on the roof and Ivan hidden among the shipping containers. He didn't see the Rising Sun, but that was part of the point. If he couldn't see them from up here, the Dragons wouldn't from the ground until it's much too late.

At about half past the hour, the Italians meandered in through the shipping containers. The two brothers stood flanked by their highest ranking officers. Casually relaxed, they looked more like they had all stepped out of an Armani photoshoot more than they looked like gangsters meeting up for a tete-a-tete with a rival faction.

He glanced back towards the entrance, but the Dragons still hadn't shown. Banishing paranoid worries, he started setting up his rifle. They would come, it was just a matter of time.

On the ground, Ivan peeked around a shipping container. The Italians looked bored, Lovino Vargas picking at his nails with a deep scowl on his face. It was 15 till and the gangsters were getting restless, their paranoid minds working behind shifting eyes and their trigger fingers growing itchy on their guns.

Lovino was around one last time and beginning to motion for his men to leave when a gunshot rang out, Vargas toppling to the ground as the bullet hit him square in the chest.

"Lovi!" Feliciano cried, rushing to his brother's side.

"Cosa é successo?" Lovino asked, sitting up and putting a hand to his chest. He ripped open his expensive shirt to reveal a bullet proof vest, the bullet lodged inside. "I was shot! Fucking bastards! Find them!" He snarled. "Fan out! Search the whole area."

Ivan cursed under his breath, ducking between the shipping containers. He had to get out of here before they found him. Things had gone tits up in the span of a few seconds, leaving Ivan wondering what the hell had just happened.

More gunshots rang out, this time coming from the direction of the choke point. He growled under his breath and made a break for the bank, hoping he could escape the fight by jumping in the river.

Up on the roof, Alfred had a full view of the action. He hadn't seen the initial shooter, but he did see Lovino go down. The Red Dragons had appeared seemingly out of nowhere, rushing the Rising Sun and trapping them between themselves and the Italians. Alfred would bet his bottom dollar one of them had shot Vargas. The Rising Sun were skirmishing with them now, trading bullets back and forth across barricades made of boxes and barrels. The Italians had spread out among the shipping containers, with the largest part of their force heading towards the fight at the choke point.

Alfred bit his lip and searched the dock for Ivan, who he hadn't seen since he disappeared among the maze of containers. If he tried to get to the choke point, he'd get caught up in the crossfire, but there was only one other way out and most of the river was blocked by the containers.

Ivan's heart thudded in his chest with every step as he ran through the maze trying to get to the river. If he was found by the Italians, he'd be shot on sight. Even if he didn't die, being seen could potentially unravel their whole operation. He had to get to the river.

Panic shot through him as a bullet whizzed past his ear, and he returned fire without really looking, hooking a hard left to put space and obstacles between him and the shooter. Another bullet grazed his shoulder and he cried out in pain, ducking behind a container to fire off a few shots. He breathed a sigh of relief at the dull thud of his bullet finding its mark and took off again, pressing a hand to his shoulder to help dull the pain.

He could see the river now, and he broke out into a desperate run. He was needed to make it. He was going to make it. He wouldn't, couldn't, die here. He had promised Natasha. He had told her he was coming home. He would not be the reason she shut herself off completely.

Alfred's heart leapt into his throat as he caught sight of Ivan dashing across open ground towards the river. Bullets flew in all directions, and he could see two Italians headed towards him, not shooting only because they hadn't seen him yet. He bit his lip and adjusted his grip on his gun, ready to protect Ivan if he needed to.

He only had a half dozen yards to go when Lovino himself stepped out of the maze, levelling his gun at Ivan's back. The world around Alfred slowed to a crawl as he shouldered his rifle, looked down the sights, ran the complex equations in his head, and took the shot. The moment seemed to stretch on forever until the crack of the bullet leaving the gun shattered it.

It went straight through his head.

All Ivan heard was a loud crack and the slump of a body on the ground. He didn't know who it was or who had taken the shot, but he thanked his lucky stars it wasn't him dead as he dived

into the river, swimming as deep as he could before trying to get some distance.

Alfred let out a shaky breath he hadn't known he'd been holding and set his gun aside with trembling hands. He hadn't shot anyone since that pedophile. He had hoped, prayed, that he would never have to again.

He fought the urge to throw up.

He stayed curled up on the roof as gunfire went off all around him, trying to block it out. What couldn't have lasted more than a few minutes seemed to go on for hours. By the time the last gunshot rang out, he was struggling not to cry.

What had he just done?

It was Im Yong Soo who found him there, staring blankly at his hands with bright, glassy eyes. They shared a tired look, and Alfred could see the red rim around the man's own eyes.

"I thought this would be easy for you." Im Yong said mildly.

"I could say the same for you." Alfred replied.

"You'd be wrong." He shrugged.

"So would you." Alfred agreed. A silent moment passed between them and Im Yong nodded.

"We were ambushed." He told him, shoving his hands in his pockets.

"I saw." He said, starting to finally pack away his rifle. "Robbie jumped in the river, I'm gonna have to go find him."

"Mei already has people out looking. I'll tell her to focus on the river." He said, taking out a cigarette and lighting it. "You should head down. Mei has our marching orders from Kiku." He took a drag off of his cigarette and left Alfred alone on the roof. For a moment, Alfred wished he'd asked for one of his own.

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Water was still dripping off of his clothing when Ivan walking into the impromptu meeting with the two Rising Suns who had found him huddled in a patch of reeds on the other side of the river. He took his place beside Alfred, wincing as his jeans chafed against his thighs.

"We're all here. Good, that means we can start." Mei said, the murmur of the gathered gangsters dying down as she spoke.

"Now someone, please, tell me," She asked sweetly, her smile all glinting teeth and steel, her dark eyes snapping dangerously, "How the hell the Dragons found out about our ambush?"

The room was silent.

"We have a mole." She snarled, her pristine red nails carving gouges onto the wooden crate she had set up as a makeshift table. "And I want to know who it is! Now, we can do this the easy way, or we can do this the hard way. You have thirty seconds." She told them, looking primly at her watch.

The seconds ticked by, no one answered.

Alfred fought the urge to squirm as Mei's eyes raked over the gathered crowd. "Twenty seconds." She reminded them tersely.

Some of the men began to sweat, their eyes darting back and forth. Mei's lips curled up into a smirk that was more of a snarl. "Ten seconds." She sing-songed.

A few men in particular near the back started to fidget, Mei's eyes latching onto them just as Alfred and Ivan's did. "Five....four....three-"

"It was Homura!" One of the men blurted out. Another of the men, probably Homura, turned bright purple as he lunged at the other. The men who had been sweating alongside them held him back as he screeched at the whistleblower in Japanese. English curse words started slipping in as he wrenched himself out of the other men's hold and attacked him.

Mei sighed and shook her head as she put a bullet through his head.

"Now, Yuki, you're going to tell me what happened." Mei said, levelling her gun at him. "Oh, and someone grab the other two." She said offhandedly. The others quickly hemmed them in, detaining them until Mei decided what to do with him.

"H-homura...he had a girl, her family's all Red Dragon. He went braggin' to her. He was cryin' about it during the fight, hiding behind a box and not shooting. He wasn't anything but a fucking coward and I swear I didn't know until we were already getting shot at!" He told her, eyes pleading. "I swear I didn't know nothin'!" He insisted again.

"What about the other two?" She asked, jerking her head towards them.

"I told them. After the fight. They weren't involved, I swear!" He told her.

"You sure do swear a lot." Im Yong said, his pistol still in his hand.

Mei looked down the barrel of her gun at him for a long moment before flipping the safety back on and holstering it. "Don't. Cross me." She said, her eyes hard as she stared him down. He nodded emphatically, scurrying out from under her gaze as soon as he was allowed. "Let the other two go. Dump the body with the rest." She told her crew, her heels clicking on the pavement as she walked away.

The room let out a simultaneous breath. Alfred's heart was still hammering in his chest. He had thought, for a moment, that maybe it would come back on them. Maybe they'd assume the most obvious candidates for a witch hunt were the new hires. He grabbed Ivan's hand and squeezed it hard, glancing at his impassive, bloodless face.

"Let's get out of here." He murmured, having seen damn near enough of the docks. Ivan nodded, and they walked silently back to their car hand in hand.

It wasn't until Alfred and Ivan were on their way back to the safe house and a siren sounded in the distance that it hit the both of them.

The cops had never shown up.

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Ivan and Alfred are found out...and made an offer they can't refuse.

Leon sipped at his brandy, savoring it like the taste of victory on his tongue. They'd trapped the Rising Sun between them and the Italians, thinning the numbers of two of their main rivals simultaneously. The Italians blamed the Rising Sun, the Rising Sun had tasted bitter defeat, and Leon had the distinction of organizing the whole thing. And to top it all off, Lovino Vargas was dead. Shot through the head by a sniper. If anyone knew who was responsible, no one was coming forward. Leon had insisted to Feliciano that it had been the Rising Sun, and that obviously the Italians had been their target. He had just happened to be fortuitously late to the meeting. Feliciano, idiot that he was, had probably bought it.

Yes, things had worked out well for Leon.

But one thing nagged at him. The man Gilbert had mentioned, the one who had been with the Rising Sun at the botched meeting, the tall one with violet eyes and hair so pale it was almost white. The mess with the backpack was more than just concerning. If people in Kiku's inner circle were working with the cops, Mei had to be informed. The police could do whatever they wanted with Honda, it would get him out of the way for a while if nothing else. But Mei was still necessary. He couldn't allow that pawn to be taken yet.

"Leon, I have something for you." Chen said as he came into his office. He carried a file folder stuffed full of papers, looking giddy like a kid on Christmas morning. "You'll never fucking guess who that idiot Honda has hired." He grinned, slapping the file down on the table. "They really shoulda picked someone who stands out less. Tracking this pig down was dead easy."

Leon frowned and grabbed the file off of the desk, opening it to reveal two driver's license pictures of their new friends. Chun worked fast, he approved. Leon looked through the file, his eyebrow inching higher as he read. "A cop?" He snorted, almost not believing it. But the evidence was right in front of him, two faces smiling at him from their official piggy portraits, all gussied up in their dress uniforms.

"Alfred Jones." He murmured, brow furrowing as he stared at the four-eyed bastard's picture. "Alfred Jones. Where have I heard that name before?" He asked. It sounded familiar, especially that last name. Fairly common, but something in the back of his head pinged it as important. Why?

"He's the Chief of Police's son." Chen grinned, a dangerous light in his eyes. "And it gets so much better, boss. His former step mom, his brother's mother, is in debt with us up to her

eyeballs. She's hooked on that shit."

Leon grinned. "Hooked enough to sell out her kid?" He asked.

"Bitch hasn't seen him since he was a baby. She'd probably sell her own mother for a fix." Chen said. Leon thanked every lucky star in heaven. God had delivered these two dumbass cops to him. Honda couldn't have orchestrated his own downfall better if he had hogtied himself and mailed himself right to Leon's office.

"Tell her I'll keep her in drugs for the rest of her life if she brings me the brother." Leon told him. "When she agrees, and she will, bring her here. What about the other one?" He asked, waving his hand towards Ivan's picture.

"Braginsky has two sisters. One is a little kid, perfect size for a snatch and grab." Chen said. Leon could hardly believe his luck. Everything was coming together so well he was almost afraid he was dreaming.

"Grab her. But for fucks sake, don't be rough unless you need to be." He told him. He drew very, very few lines. Needless cruelty towards children was one of the few. Chen nodded and left Leon to his planning. The man had done well, and would have to be rewarded. He looked at the two photos, a razorblade smile cutting across his face. "Ivan Braginsky and Alfred Jones. Well, well, well....welcome to the game, boys." He chuckled, finishing his drink. It still tasted like victory.

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The sound of his ringtone woke Matthew from the impromptu nap he'd been taking on his textbook. He scrubbed the drool off of his face and book and looked at the phone. An unknown number flashed across the screen. He frowned and answered it

"Hello?" He asked.

"Matthew?" Came a woman's voice from the other end. He didn't recognize her, immediately annoyed at the increasingly likely possibility that she was a telemarketer.

"Speaking. Who is this?" He asked, wondering who was calling him from an unknown number in the middle of the work day.

"It's, uh..," The woman took a shaky breath. "It's your mother."

Matthew didn't even feel the phone slip from his hand.

His heart pounded in his ears, his hand hanging frozen where he had been holding the phone to his ear. Time seemed to stop as his mind tried to process the information. But no matter how hard he tried to parse it out, it just wouldn't compute. He had to be dreaming. He fell asleep at his desk and he was dreaming. It wouldn't be the first time his sleeping mind had conjured up his mother.

"Matthew?" Stephanie's voice came from where the phone had fallen on the desk. He scrambled to pick it back up, hands clumsy and numb.

"Yeah! Yeah, mom, I'm here!" He assured her, breathless. "How are you?" He asked, wincing at the overly casual question. It couldn't be a dream, he was being as awkward as he always was.

"I'm....I'm good. How about you? How are you doing?" She asked, her voice trembling.

"I'm great! Just studying." He told her. It was all so surreal, he didn't know how to act. He had no idea what to say to his own mother. The thought was almost funny.

"Oh, what do you study?" She asked.

"I'm in law school." He said. He clutched the phone like a lifeline. He still remembered the day he got accepted into his top choice. He'd called Emily, and it had been nice. She'd been happy and excited for him, supportive and encouraging as she always was. But after he had hung up the phone, he had stared at it for over ten minutes wondering where his own mother was and if she'd be proud of him. Eventually he'd chucked the phone at the wall and broken it.

Usually that memory filled him with rage. Now, he was just so blown away that she'd actually called that he couldn't muster up his usual anger.

"Law school? Wow, that's... that's so great!" She gave a watery little laugh and started to cry. "Mattie, baby, I am so sorry. I'm so, so sorry. I'm the worst mother in the world!" She sobbed. Pain laced through Matthew's chest.

"Please don't cry, mom. It's okay. Just please don't cry." He begged her.

"Let me make it up to you, baby. I'm living in the city now. You could...you could come over. I'd love to meet you." She said.

Silence fell. His mind raced a mile a minute, his heart keeping pace. His mom wanted to meet him. His mother, the woman who'd walked out on him so young that Al had better memories of her than he did, wanted him to come to her house. Anger rushed over him like a tidal wave, and he contemplated just hanging up on her. It was what she deserved, a small voice in the back of his head said. She left him, why should he run when she called? He took a breath and loosened his grip on his phone. People make mistakes. It's never too late to change. He firmly, truly believed that. And it was his mother. He owed her at least one do-over.

"Where do you live? When do you want to meet up?" He asked.

"I'm free now? I could text you the address?" She said, sounding uncertain. Matthew hesitated. Was he ready for this right now? Maybe he should wait for Al to come home. But Al would tell him not to go. Al would let that angry little voice inside him win.

"Now is great! I'll be right over. Just text me the address." He told her.

"Great! I will!" She said, he could practically hear her smile through the phone. "I'll see you, then?"

"Yeah, I'll see you soon, mom." He grinned, hanging up the phone. He tossed it on the desk and hurried to his closet, grabbing a nicer shirt and a new pair of pants. He wanted to make a good first impression, after all. He threw on the clothes and grabbed his phone, wallet, and keys, practically running out the door.

Most of the drive was spent half regretting his decision and fighting the urge to turn back out from nerves alone. He knew it was going to be awkward, and he loved nothing more than avoiding awkwardness. But he wanted, needed, a relationship with his mother. He loved Emily, but she wasn't his mother.

He parked outside of the small, crooked house in a run down suburb and spent a moment in the car just gathering up his courage. If he went in there, he could never go back. She'd be real, not just the spectre of a memory. He'd know if he passed her on the street, and she'd know him. They would never be strangers again.

He got out of the car and knocked on the door.

A short, petite woman with fading blonde hair and tired eyes opened the door. Her face was rough and lined, like she'd lived a hard life since she'd disappeared. When she smiled, her teeth were crooked and browning. "Matthew?" She asked, her voice high and hopeful.

"Mom?" He asked, unsure of what else to say. She looked at him, her eyes drinking him in. They hung suspended for an instant, neither sure what to say.

"Look at me, leaving you out on the porch in the cold." She said bashfully. "Come in!" She urged him, stepping back.

He ducked his head in a quick nod and stepped inside after her. The house was small, cramped, and dirty. Nothing seemed to have a place, much less be in it, and the whole space seemed dark and dingy.

"Have you lived here long?" He asked, wondering what had happened in her life that such a promising young woman had ended up like this.

"Hopefully not much longer." She said, smiling cryptically. "Why don't you come into the kitchen? I'll get you something to drink."

"Sure, sounds great." He said, following her into the kitchen. "What do you have?" He asked, going to sit down. As he reached for the chair, he was grabbed from behind, his arms caught in an iron hold.

"What the hell!?" He shouted, struggling against whoever had him. "Mom! Run! Call the police!" He said, fighting harder. He couldn't let them get her!

Stephanie stayed put, not looking at him.

"Mom?" He asked, fear creeping into the edges of his voice.

"You shouldn't have come here, Matthew." She said quietly, turning to look at him with weary, tired eyes. "Who taught you to be so trusting? It was probably Alfred, he was always

so protective of you. He's a good boy." She sighed.

"Mom....mom, what's going on?" Matt asked, the bottom dropping out of his stomach as it clicked.

"I'm sick, Mattie." She said, looking away. "These guys, they're going to give me what I need. All I had to do was get you here. You-" She choked up, tears coming to her eyes. "Why did you make it so easy!? You weren't supposed to come!" She sobbed, shaking her head furiously. "I abandoned you! You weren't supposed to come!" She repeated, voice hitching.

"You're sick?" Matt asked. "Why didn't you tell me? I would have helped you! What do you need? Just tell me and I'll get it!" He promised. Stephanie gave a watery, frustrated laugh.

"I'm not....I'm not ill, Mattie." She told him. "I'm...I'm a junkie." She spat venomously, burying her face in her hands and giving a broken sob. "They said if I gave you to them, they would supply me for life. They promised you wouldn't get hurt if Al did what he was told. And I know he will! Al would never, ever let you get hurt! It'll be okay, baby. Al will do what he needs to do and you two can go home. You'll never, ever have to see me again."

Matthew went slack in his captor's arms. Everything felt numb and far away, the only sound he could hear was the rush of blood in his ears. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Drugs?" He croaked, his eyes burning as fat, hot tears began to roll down his cheeks. "You called me out of the blue after years of nothing...to sell me for a lifetime supply of drugs!?" He screamed, renewing his struggle as he tried to lunge at her. "I can't believe you!"

"I'm sorry, baby!" She sobbed, dropping to her knees. "I'm so sorry!"

"Shut up!" He snapped, eyes wild as he fought to get at her. "Just shut up!"

"Actually, kid, I think its time for you to shut up." His captor said, holding a rag to his mouth and nose. Matthew fought harder, yelling muffled threats through the cloth. But his limbs quickly grew heavy, his mind foggy. Eventually he sagged in his grip, just trying to stay awake. The last thing he saw before he passed out was the man holding him toss a sandwich baggy fully of dirty white crystal shards on the kitchen table.

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"It was really nice of your sister to let me come over for dinner." Toris said, adjusting his backpack as they walked together down the sidewalk. School had just let out, and children ran laughing and shouting past them as they went. Natalia was quiet, she was usually quiet these days, and Toris had been trying to get her to engage. She appreciated her friend's efforts, but her mind was firmly on her brother.

"Do you think he's okay?" She asked, glancing over at Toris.

"You said he's the best, bravest, coolest cop ever! I'm sure he's fine. Plus, how much trouble could he get into at a policeman convention?" He asked, a little confused at the question.

Natalia sighed. Ivan had told her he was going to a convention, but she knew it wasn't true. She'd spread the lie anyway, not wanting her brother to get in trouble. She didn't know why he was lying, or where he really was, but she would protect him from here. She was a big girl, and brave. She would keep everything at home going until he got back.

"Let's go to the store. I have to pick up some stuff for Katya." She said, leading Toris down a side street. Katya had dropped the rest of their eggs that morning and had a catastrophic meltdown. Natasha had gone to her and done all the things Ivan usually did when she had a fit. She stroked her hair, told her it would be okay, and cleaned up the mess.

Katya had just held her and kept crying and apologizing. Confused, Natalia had assured her the eggs weren't a big deal. Katya had just shaken her head, sobbing, and hugged her tighter. Natasha didn't understand, but she let her sister hold her until she stopped crying.

"Where are they going in such a hurry?" Toris asked, tearing Natasha out of the memory. She frowned as he pointed to a big black van with no windows speeding down the street. The hair on the back of her neck stood up, and she grabbed Toris' wrist.

"Let's go." She said, starting to pull him away. But before they could get more than a few steps, the van had screeched to a halt beside them. The doors flung open and two towering figures stepped out. Natasha's blood ran cold as they grabbed her, freezing in fear.

"You leave her alone!" Toris shouted, throwing his backpack at the man who grabbed her. The impact jarred Natasha out of her fear and broke the man's grip on her arm. Taking the opening, Natasha tore away from the men and grabbed Toris' hand, booking it away from the van with her friend in tow.

"Who were those guys!?" Toris asked as they ran, their feet pounding against the pavement and their hearts pounding in their chests.

"I don't know." Natalia said, jerking him down an alleyway.

"Why did they try to grab you?" He asked, panic creeping into his voice.

"I don't know!" Natalia hissed. "Now be quiet and concentrate on running!" She dragged him into another alley guarded by an old, crooked fence. The gap between the gate and the posts was just big enough for a child to fit through, and Natasha hurried Toris through the gap before squeezing through herself.

"There. We should have lost them." She said, panting and doubling over to catch her breath.

"Natasha," Toris said, his voice shaking. "What's happening? Why are those guys after you? I'm scared." There were tears in his eyes and he was trembling, and Natasha vowed violent revenge on whoever those guys were.

"I don't know what's going on, Toris. I don't know who they are or what they want. I just know that it isn't safe for you to come over tonight. You have to go home." She said.

"No!" Toris cried, looking like she'd asked him to shoot her himself.

"Don't argue with me!" Natasha spat. "You're going straight home, away from this mess!" She put her hands on her hips and drew herself up to full height like Ivan did when she was in trouble.

It didn't seem to phase Toris at all. "Natasha! If I hadn't been there...if I hadn't thrown my backpack..." He cut himself off with a choked sob. "What if I go home and they catch up to you on your way home?" He asked, voice strained. "What if they come tonight-"

Natalia cut him off. "What if they come tonight and you're there? You think you'll rescue me? That you'll save my sister? You think you can protect me better than a grown up, you dummy? If they come again, they'll get you too and it'll be my fault because I didn't make you go home. You'll just be one more kid for Katya to worry about. If they kill us, how will your Mama feel?" She asked her eyes hard and her little mouth set in a thin line.

Toris started to cry. Natasha sighed and hugged him, petting his hair like she had her sister's. "It'll be okay, Toris. But you have to go home. I'll be alright, I know a twisty way home, and Katya is there to protect me. And Eloise lives right next door and her brother has a billion guns." She told him, stepping away to let him wipe his eyes.

"I don't want them to get you, Natasha! I don't want you to die! You're my best friend!" He sobbed, scrubbing at his eyes. Natasha's face warmed, and she blinked at him in wonder. She was his best friend? She'd never had a best friend before, not even in Russia.

"You're my best friend, too. That's why I can't let you get caught up in this more than you already are. If something happened to you because of me, I would never forgive myself. Please, Toris. Go home." She begged him, tears suddenly springing to her own eyes as she considered the possibility that it might already be too late. They saw him with her. He saw them. Who knew if Toris was safe even at home?

Toris looked at her for a long time, wavering, but he finally nodded. Natasha took his hand in hers and pulled him towards the other end of the alley. "It'll be okay, Toris. I promise." She said, squeezing his hand.

"Well," a man said from the mouth of the alley as he stepped out to block their way, "it's certainly looking up for me, at least." He chuckled. The blood drained from Natasha's face and she looked at Toris. Her best friend.

She had to protect him.

"Get ready to run." She said, her face set in a hard mask.

"Natasha, what are you going to do?" Toris asked, sounding frightened.

"Don't worry, just run." She snapped. She braced herself for a moment and took off like a shot. "Toris run!" She shouted, barrelling into the man blocking their way. She smacked into him hard enough to knock him back, letting Toris slip past.

As he grabbed her and hauled her over his shoulder, she looked up at Toris. He was standing in the middle of the street, eyes wide and jaw slack. He took a step towards her and Natalia

didn't know if she wanted to slap him or hug him. He was being so brave.

"Run, Toris! Run!" She screamed. He stood for a few seconds, debating, but eventually took off down an alley, hopefully towards safety. As Natalia was shoved into the van, she breathed a sigh of relief. If Toris was okay, it had been worth it. She would just have to find a way to rescue herself, like Ivan would. She would be brave, just like her brother.

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Light filtered through ice cubes and amber liquid as Alfred held his glass of whiskey up, swirling it around in tempestuous contemplation. He and Ivan were sitting in the living room, the question burning in both of their minds hanging in the air unasked for fear of being overheard.

After a whole day of silence on the matter, Alfred was the first to crack.

"Why didn't they show up?" He asked quietly, leaving the who intentionally vague in case the mics picked it up.

"I don't know." Ivan answered back, frowning into his own glass. That was the worst part, that they just didn't know what had gone wrong. It could be nothing. Someone grabbed the backpack, a dog took off with it, it got put back in the dumpster and thrown away with the trash. But the possibility that it could mean everything weighed heavily on both of them.

"We have to lay low. It's the best way." Ivan reminded him. "Don't give anyone a reason to look twice." Alfred nodded. He knew that, but that didn't make the not knowing any easier. If he had been tense before, he was half panicked now.

They both jumped when the phone rang. Alfred took a deep breath and picked it up, frowning when he saw it was Mei. "Hello?" He answered.

"Jaime. Got something for you, to apologize for hardly getting any of the action last night. That lovely gentleman you persuaded to pay his protection tax just called. Says a couple of Red Dragons are down there roughing up customers, trying to shake him down." She told him

"The nerve of them, trying to extort money from a poor, hapless citizen." Alfred tutted. "Someone should teach them a lesson." Mei chuckled.

"I agree. Would you like to do the honors?" She asked, "I know you and the fine businessman in question are already well acquainted."

"It would be a pleasure. We'll head out right now." He assured her, hanging up the phone and turning to Ivan. "They paid these guys how much money, and they're just using us as muscle? Dumbasses." He snorted.

"Well, let's just go ahead and get it done with. If we refuse, questions." He reminded him.

"Yeah, yeah. I know. Let's just go." He sighed, grabbing the keys and beckoning for Ivan to follow him. Ivan could see the rising agitation in the way he stomped to the car, and the way

he shut the door a little harder than normal. He could empathize. He was just waiting for the other boot to fall and the bullets to start flying. He knew, just knew, that the police hadn't missed the drop off on accident.

The nightclub was different by night. Music pulsed outwards from the doors as they approached, people lined up around the block to get in. Inside, lights strobed and flashed to the music as bodies pushed and slid against each other. Gilbert stood by the door in an expensive, well-tailored suit with a harried look on his face.

"Snow White! Long time, no see. How's it hangin'?" Alfred asked, sauntering up and clapping him on the shoulder. Gilbert gave him a look of pure disgust and stepped away from him like he had been burned.

"Shut it, glasses. Just do your damn job and fuck up the assholes ruining the vibe of my awesome nightclub!" He demanded, jabbing his finger at a pair of tall, lean Asian men leaning up against the building across the street, smoking and watching the clubgoers closely.

"Fine, fine. Why don't you take the stick out of your ass while I'm gone, yeah?" Alfred sneered, turning and following Ivan as he started across the street. He really had to look into that guy's coding and licences when he got back to the precinct.

"Hey, fellas. Having a nice night?" Ivan asked the men as they approached, his hands shoved casually in his pockets, his posture cavalier. The men stamped out their cigarettes and shoved off of the wall.

"How about we do this somewhere more private?" The shorter of the two asked. "Wouldn't want the police breaking up the party." He grinned, a harsh, feral expression. Ivan raised an eyebrow and smirked.

"Why should we go anywhere when the point is to get you to leave?" He asked.

"To get us to leave." The other man answered. "And get us to stay gone. If you think you can." He challenged, laughing like the thought was absurd. Suddenly, Ivan felt the need to let out some of the frustration that had been building up over the course of the mission.

"Where." He growled, clenching his jaw.

"There." The man pointed, indicating what looked like an abandoned warehouse. Ivan looked at Alfred for confirmation.

Alfred bit his lip, considering the possibility that this was a trap and they were about to get jumped. But if they left without confronting these guys, there would be questions. And they really didn't want the cops involved, ironically enough. He blew out a short breath and nodded.

"Excellent." The shorter gangster grinned. "This should be over quick enough." He laughed outright at that. Ivan felt his blood boil, and he was looking forward to smashing this asshole's face in.

Ivan stalked behind the men with Alfred bringing up the rear. They slipped in through a side door into darkness. Ivan grabbed Alfred's hand so he wouldn't lose him in the gloom, and started feeling along the wall for a light switch. He would rather not wait and give the gangsters the opportunity to attack them in the dark.

The door shut behind them with a click, followed quickly by the lock turning. Alfred and Ivan turned to see what was going on behind them as light flooded the space and Leon Chun, second in command to Yao Wang, clapped slow and sarcastic from the middle of the warehouse floor, flanked by a dozen armed guards and a black, windowless van than no doubt held more.

"Well, well. Ivan, Alfred. So nice of you to join us!" He called from across the warehouse floor. "We've been waiting for you." He spread his arms wide, indicating his assembled party. Ivan's blood ran cold and drained out of his face as he struggled not to shake. Heat surged through Alfred's veins as he grit his teeth and clenched his fists.

"How did you find out?" He demanded, spitting the words at Leon like venom.

"You fucked up, Al. Your drop off point was shit, and your dumbass partner didn't even see the guy sleeping behind the dumpster. Wouldn't have been too bad, actually, if he didn't work for Beilschmidt. Gilbert's a fucking genius, you know. Surprising, I'm aware." He chuckled. "But he is. He cracked your code in one night and came to me with everything. After that, it was dead simple tracking you down. I mean, how many guys over 6 feet with purple eyes do you think there are in this city?" He scoffed. "What is this? Amateur hour? Kiku is stupid enough to hire cops, and those cops are stupid enough to get caught this easily? Its almost disappointing." He sneered.

"So, what? Are you gonna kill us?" Alfred asked, snarling. He kept his hand poised over the gun at his hip. There was no way he was going down without a fight.

"Oh, no. I have something different in mind." He said, snapping his fingers. One of the guards opened the door of the van and Matt and Natasha were drug out, kicking and screaming through the rags tied around their mouths.

"Let her go!" Ivan roared, pure rage twisting his face. Seeing her brother, Natasha's struggling took on new vigor, and she slammed her foot down on the toes of the man holding her. She ducked out of his hold and started to make a run for her brother. One of the guards casually grabbed his rifle and smashed the butt into her head, sending her tumbling to the ground.

"Natasha!" Ivan cried, lunging for the man who had hit her. Alfred caught him around the middle and held him back, shouting at him not to escalate the situation. Ivan could barely hear him through the blinding, white hot rage surging through him. His sister, his baby sister, lay still on the ground and Ivan couldn't even go to her.

Natalia stirred, attempting to struggle to her feet. Suddenly, he felt the barrel of a gun pressed against her head and she stilled, beginning to tremble. "I wouldn't move if I were you, little girl." He cautioned her coldly. "Or you'll get more than a bump on your head."

"What do you want?" Ivan spat, standing down. He could feel Leon's neck under his hands, he wanted it so badly.

"Oh, not much. A monopoly on organized crime in the city, to be fantastically wealthy, to take down everyone who stands in my way. Simple goals, really." He answered, shrugging. "And you're going to help me." He grinned.

"How?" Alfred asked warily.

"You're going to kill Kiku Honda." He said simply, as if discussing picking up milk. "If you don't, I shoot the brat and the twink. And you, of course. That goes without saying, though."

"Why not just let us arrest him? Doesn't that achieve your goal?" Ivan asked, dropping his American accent. He hoped it would make Natasha feel better to hear his voice without the flat, broad tones he's taken to using undercover.

"No!" Leon snapped, reigning himself in quickly. "No, it doesn't. You're a cop, you know better than anyone how easy it is to run a criminal empire from a prison cell. I need him out of the way. That means dead, not locked up."

"We'll do it." Ivan said immediately.

Alfred balked, "What the fuck? Ivan, we can't!" He said, shaking his head, dumbfounded. He couldn't believe Ivan had agreed that quickly! To just agree to become assassins like that?

"I'll do it. If Jones is willing to let his brother die, that's his problem." Ivan told Leon, not even looking at Alfred.

Alfred looked at Matt, eyes wide and hurt at Ivan's implication. Matt just shook his head, trying to tell him something through the gag. But he couldn't understand it, couldn't interpret what he meant. Maybe he was telling him not to do it. Maybe he was telling him not to listen to Ivan. If he backed out, would he ever hear Matt say anything again?

"Fine." He snapped. "Fine, we'll do it." He squeezed his eyes shut and pulled in a shaky breath. What had they just agreed to? What kind of devil had they just sold their souls to?

"Good choice." Leon said, smirking. The guards loaded Matt and Natalia, both much more subdued than they had been. "I'll be watching the news very closely, boys. Don't disappoint, and don't keep me waiting. Go." He commanded.

The two men who had led them in ushered them back out into the street. When the door clicked shut behind them, Alfred fell to his knees. Ice crawled through his veins and a scream he refused to let out clawed at the back of his throat. He trembled, lightly at first and then more violently until he was shaking like a leaf.

"Alfred?" Ivan asked softly, placing a hand on his shoulder. He knelt down beside him, tilting his chin up to look into his eyes. "It's going to be okay." He murmured, drawing his partner to his chest in a comforting hug. Alfred choked out a small sob he immediately squashed, burying his face in Ivan's coat and huddling close to him.

"We have to go, Alfred. We can't do this here." He said, gently leading Alfred to stand up. He wrapped an arm around his waist and pulled him close. Desperate for any scrap of comfort, Alfred leaned into him as they walked. He wasn't sure he could have even walked without Ivan there.

"I never wanted to kill again." He rasped, starting to tremble again. Ivan squeezed his waist and shook his head.

"I'll do the killing, Alik. Don't worry. It'll be okay." He assured him softly, opening the car door for him, grabbing his hand for a moment as he climbed in as a show of support. Somehow, it didn't seem to comfort Alfred. Leon Chun had Matt, he was going to kill him. He was going to kill Ivan's little sister. The adorable one who had almost held her own in the pie eating contest at the annual picnic.

"We fucked up, Ivan." He said, voice small and weak and tired. "We really fucked up."

"Yeah." Ivan sighed, starting up the car. "Yeah, we did."

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

The truth comes out

Chapter Notes

Lemon at the end of the chapter

The coffee shop buzzed with conversation, accompanied by the intermittent harmony of the machines doing their jobs. It was a block away from the university, and Leon fit in well with the college crowd. In baggy jeans and a black hoodie, he could be mistaken for any other millennial in the place, here to grab some coffee and bang out a shitty screenplay on his laptop. The baseball cap pulled low over his eyes would make it hard for even people who knew him to pick him out from the crowd. He needed anonymity for this meeting.

As if on cue, Mei hurried through the door. Her long, dark hair was pulled up into the kind of sloppy bun she wouldn't be caught wearing on her worst day, sweatpants and a flannel that was at least two sizes too big added to the illusion that this girl was anyone but Mei Li. The bulky Clark Kent glasses were a nice touch, too, but maybe a little much. He signaled her over to his table and graciously gestured for her to sit.

She took the coffee he slid across the table with a gracious thanks, looking like she needed it. With the bags under her eyes and the surly expression on her face, she looked very much the exhausted undergrad. It was amusing, given that he knew why she hadn't gotten much sleep, and that he was the cause.

"Really, Leon? Your scapegoat was Homura? I know damn well whatever he told Xia, Xia didn't tell you. She's hated you since we were kids." Mei scoffed, setting down her coffee with a terse click. "Kiku isn't buying it, either. He's had me up for days hunting down a mole he's never going to find! If I wasn't so damn tired, this would be fucking hilarious. But I am, and it's not." She groaned, letting her head fall into her hands.

"I know, Mei, I'm sorry. But I have something I think will make it up to you." He told her, waving the file Chen had given him in her face before handing it over. Light a few crucial papers, of course. "Your boss has really outdone himself this time." He chuckled. Mei gave him a skeptical look, but opened the file, thumbing through the papers. Her frowned deepened with every new bit of evidence.

The flare of her nostrils and the thin, hard line her mouth had become were the only visible signs of her anger. She was deadly calm as she took Alfred's picture out of the file, her hand clutching it hard enough to crinkle the paper.

"Cops?" She asked, her voice low and icy. "Honda hired cops?" Rubbing her temples, Mei let out a heavy sigh and tossed the photo back on the table with a frustrated flick. "This is exactly what I needed right now, thank you Kiku." She scoffed, pinching the bridge of her nose and growling under her breath. "This is it, Leon. The last straw. Kiku's already ready to start a witch hunt. If this gets out, and he starts asking questions, I'm finished!" She looked back over at the photo and snorted in disgust.

"Calm down." He told her, rolling his eyes. "Plans change, when the need arises, and this may actually be more fortuitous than you think." Mei gave him a skeptical look and crossed her arms over her chest, her face still a barely subdued storm.

"What do you mean?" She asked, her nails digging into her flannel. He had her on the hook, now all he had to do was reel her in.

"We know who they are, where they are, what they're doing, what they want. We own them, and they never even have to know it. They could solve all of our problems without us having to lift a finger." He was grinning now, his victory practically within his grasp. "They could easily take out Honda and Yao for us."

"And how do you expect to get them to do that?" She asked, raising an eyebrow. Leon's grin never faltered.

"We just let them do their job. Maybe arrange for a serendipitous discovery. Then when they come to arrest them, we can make sure things don't go so well for Honda and Yao." He said, leaning on his elbows and looking across the table at her expectantly.

"Things do tend to go wrong when the law gets involved." Mei said slowly, coming around to the idea. "It's easy to get the bullets to start flying, and the pigs won't care who shot who as long as it isn't one of theirs." Her grin mirrored his as she considered the possibility. "And we wouldn't even have to be there, we'd know when to have something important to do elsewhere." Leon chuckled, steepling his fingers together.

"Which is why I need you." He told her. A feeble wisp of guilt tried to cast its shadow over him. He had loved this woman, once. He had hoped to have the chance to love her again. But she was becoming dangerous, and sentiment didn't conquer the criminal underworld. "I have eyes and ears all over the city, but there's one place I don't have them. You're going to have to monitor them inside of the house. I'll need your eyes and ears to be sharper than ever."

"As if they could be sharper." She scoffed, drawing herself up a little. Proud, but rightfully so. Mei was one of the keenest people he'd ever met. Too keen for her own good. Yao had never quite been able to give her the credit she was due. He'd never appreciated her enough. He'd always suspected that was why she left, but he wasn't so sure.

"You know, you never told me what happened between you and Yao." He said, steering the conversation in a new direction in a show of seemingly sudden curiosity. Mei seemed to buy

it, a storm rolling across her face.

"He tried to trick me out." She said, her voice a low growl as her fist clenched on the table. Leon tried to be shocked, but he had no delusions about his boss. It was one of the reasons he was plotting to kill him. Business was business, and he would be the first to tell anyone that. People would find ways to make money until money disappeared, and on your back had always been an easy, lucrative, popular way to do it. There were more than enough women willing to work, wasting a top asset like that was ludicrous.

"Said he owed some senator, did him a favor." She spat, her nails digging into her palm. "And the way he said it, like it was a given that I would do that for him!" She pounded her fist on the table and Leon grabbed her hand quickly, looking around to see how many people had turned to look at them.

"I told him to go to hell. He backhanded me. I left, found Honda, sold enough intel to keep my head and get a new job, and I never looked back." She finished with false nonchalance, clutching his hand in an iron grip as steel glinted in her hard brown eyes.

"He'll pay for this, Mei. Our plan is almost complete." Leon assured her, squeezing her hand with the one she wasn't currently near breaking. "I'll even let you do it, if you need to." He offered.

"Just make sure I get to see the body." She said, rising from the table. "I need to see the bastard dead with my own eyes." Leon nodded.

"That, I can do. Have a good day, Mei." He said, nodding respectfully. She nodded back and left without a word. The bustle and chatter of the coffee shop flooded back into the bubble Mei's presence had cast around the table as Leon leaned back in his seat. The shadow of guilt crept up on him again and he banished it. No one had ever reached the top with no regrets.

His phone vibrated in his pocket and he quickly dug it out. The number was from a burner phone he had given Chen.

"Talk to me." He said, tossing his coffee in the trash as he strolled out of the shop. He still had a lot to do, after all. No rest for the wicked, indeed.

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Grey concrete walls defined the tiny room that now made up Matthew's entire existence. The door was heavy black metal, and no windows provided a reminder that the room wasn't the only thing that was real. Time seemed immaterial, compressing and stretching out in irregular intervals. He didn't know how much time had actually passed, or what was happening to Alfred. It was maddening, the not knowing. But he was the adult, and he needed to keep it together for the little girl looking to him for some form of stability.

Natalia, to her credit, was being incredibly brave. She had been quiet, but calm for the most part. If looks could kill, the guard who had brought them their last meal would be cold and stiff by now, but the blow she took to the head seemed to have tempered her somewhat. The

only sign she ever gave that she was upset was when she would curl up in the corner and try her best to hide that she was crying.

She was doing it now, curled up in the corner where she had pretended to fall asleep, trembling lightly and letting out shaky little hitches of breath. Matt's heart broke for her, and he wondered if maybe just letting her cry alone in the corner hadn't been the kindest course of action.

"Natalia?" He asked gently, placing a hand on her tiny, shaking shoulder. "You don't have to pretend to not be scared." He assured her, hoping he sounded comforting and warm and not as awkward as he felt. He'd never had to comfort a small child as the youngest of four with no nieces or nephews. "It's ok to cry, you don't have to hide it from me." Natalia looked up at him with watery eyes and shook her head, launching herself into his chest with a sob.

"I'm not scared! I'm not!" She insisted, balling her fists up in his shirt and burying her face in his chest. He patted her back, wishing he was better at this. If it was Al here, he'd know what to do.

"Well, that makes one of us." He said, letting out a short puff of laughter. "I'm terrified." She looked up at him, shocked.

"You're scared?" She asked. "But you're a grown up! Grown ups are never scared, except Katya." She amended. Mat laughed and brushed a strand of hair back behind her ear.

"Who told you that?" He asked. "Grown ups get scared all the time. I don't know where my brother is, or if he's okay. I don't know how we're going to get out of here yet, and not knowing scares me. I don't know if they have any other hostages, or where they'd be keeping them. I'm really scared, Natalia." He told her, sincere.

"Then how are you staying so calm?" She asked. That was the million dollar question, wasn't it? One he had no answer to because his calm was a lie, but he couldn't tell her that.

"Well, I trust my brother, for one. And yours, too. I know they'll find a way to get us out of here. We just have to be smart and keep our heads down. We have to wait for an opportunity and not do anything rash. Part of that is staying calm." He told her. Taking the edge of his jacket, he gently wiped away Natalia's tears.

"But it's okay to be scared, too. And it's okay to cry. Because there are two of us. So while you cry, I can keep lookout." He assured her, giving her what he hoped was his kindest smile. It seemed to work, because she smiled back a little, wiping at her eyes.

"And if you need to cry, I can watch." She said, determined. Matt forced down an amused chuckle and gave her a hug. There was no way he was going to break down in front of her, but it was cute that she had offered.

"Exactly. We're in this together." He said, holding out his little finger. She grinned and hooked her own little finger his. "Pinky promise."

"Pinky promise." She chorused. Wiping her eyes, Natasha crawled out of his lap and sat on her knees. The slightly childish gesture had seemed to raise her spirits some,. Her face was still red and blotchy from crying, but there was a small smile on her face now.

"Do you think you could tell me a story?" She asked. "I really am tired now, and usually Vanya tells me a bedtime story." The look on her face was so tenuously hopeful that he couldn't have said no if he wanted to.

"Okay, what kind of stories do you like?" He asked, settling down more comfortably himself.

"I like stories about adventures, and killing monsters, and princesses." She said, mimicking swinging a sword around. Matt chuckled and wracked his brain for an idea.

"Okay, I've got it. Lay down." He told her, covering her with his coat. "Bedtime stories don't work unless you're laying down, everyone knows that." Natalia nodded quickly, obviously eager to get to the story.

"Once upon a time, there was a brave little Princess whose brother, the King, was a mighty warrior. His battle prowess was known throughout all the world, and no one dare oppose them for fear of his might." He started. "But there was one who had no fear of the King's might. An evil Sorcerer who was jealous of the King's power had cooked up an evil scheme to make his kingdom his own." He paused for a second before continuing, having a bit of difficulty laying out the story on the fly.

"You see, he planned on kidnapping the little Princess, who the King loved dearly, and holding her for ransom. In exchange for her life, the King would surrender himself to be executed. If he refused, the Princess would die." Natalia gasped, pulling the coat a little tighter around her.

"But what the Sorcerer didn't know was that the Princess had trained with her brother from the time she could walk, and was a warrior in her own right despite her age. When the Sorcerer's men came to grab her in the middle of the night, she hid a sword in her skirts and allowed herself to be captured, knowing the Sorcerer would underestimate her." A grin spread across Natalia's face.

"She's going to kick his butt!" She giggled. Matt laughed.

"Let me finish the story." He admonished her. Natalia giggled and nodded, miming zipping her mouth shut.

"The Sorcerer informed the King that he had the Princess, and the King despaired, for he loved his sister very much."

"What's despaired?" Natalia asked, cutting him off.

"It means he was really, really sad." Matt told her. Natalia nodded and motioned for him to continue.

"The King agreed to the Sorcerer's terms, and agreed to turn himself in to be executed at dawn. But he had underestimated his sister. While the Sorcerer was negotiating with the King, the Princess had tricked a guard into unlocking her cell by pretending to be sick, then defeated him with the sword she had hidden in her skirt. She climbed all the way to the top of the tower, fighting the Sorcerer's men the whole time, until she reached the Sorcerer's lair. Inside she found the crystal ball that granted him all of his power. She smashed it on the ground, releasing the magic inside."

"What happened to the Sorcerer?" Natalia asked, eyes wide.

"He knew immediately what had happened, and he screamed and cried, knowing he was done. The King, figuring that someone had destroyed his powers, took out his sword and chopped off his head, knowing it must have been his brave, noble little sister. When he went to the tower, sure enough, the Princess was there tying up the remaining soldiers for arrest. He declared her his Champion from that day forward, which meant she was a knight, and the best in the realm. And she fought and won many, many battles. And they all lived happily ever after."

He looked to Natalia to ask her if she had enjoyed the story only to find her eyes closed and her breathing deep and even. He smiled and adjusted his coat over her. "Sweet dreams, Princess." He murmured, leaning back against the wall and wondering how the hell he was supposed to protect the little girl sleeping next to him when he couldn't even figure out how to save himself.

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Emily hummed tunelessly to herself as she pulled the plug out and washed the remaining suds down the drain with the dish water. She'd just finished up a nice, quiet lunch with Francis and had the flat to herself for the rest of the evening. She planned to kick back with a glass of wine and proof the final edit of her latest novel, something she had been putting off for far too long.

The phone rang just as she was drying her hands, Arthur's name flashing across the screen. She quickly finished and grabbed the phone, wondering what her son could want in the middle of the day when he should be busy at work. A strange nervousness fell over her, and her first thought was of Alfred off somewhere in the aether. "Hello, darling. Are you ok?" She asked, brushing aside her worry.

"I'm well, mum. Have you seen Matt? He was supposed to bring me my electric kettle back last night and he never showed up." He asked. It sounded at first like a casual inquiry, but Arthur was her son. She could hear the slight strain in his voice, and she knew how his mind worked. Police were paranoid over thinkers, and Arthur even more so.

Worrying her lip between her teeth, Emily tried again to push down that sliver of worry.. "No, I haven't seen him. Why don't you call Francis? He just left here." She suggested, telling herself that it hadn't even been one full day, and not bringing a kettle by wasn't a sign of anything.

"I called him already. He hasn't seen him since yesterday afternoon. He also didn't show up for class, or for work. And Dad went by his flat and he wasn't there." Arthur said, the edge in his voice growing. Emily gripped the phone tight, her gut instincts screaming at her that Matt was in danger.

"I'll make a few calls and get back to you, love." She told him, putting a smile on and hoping it smoothed out the tension in her own voice. "I'm sure he'll turn up." They exchanged goodbyes and Emily hung up the phone, setting it on the counter with a soft click.

Had she done this?

It seemed paranoid, verging on delusional, to even think. But she couldn't shake the feeling that this was her fault. All those years ago, she thought she had made a mistake sending Stephanie away. For years, Matt's whole life, she had carried that mistake in her heart, letting it weigh her down. When she had tracked Stephanie down and given her Matt's number, it had felt like that weight had lifted.

The weight settled back down on her chest as she realized her only mistake was undoing what she had done. She tried to tell herself that she was being ridiculous, that she had no evidence Stephanie had anything to do with this. There was no evidence there even was a 'this'.

She snatched her phone off of the counter and dialed Matt's number, needing something to dissuade her before she jumped in again and made the situation worse. But the phone rang. And rang. And rang. She grit her teeth and left him a voicemail, hanging up and tossing the phone back on the counter with a frustrated huff. She was just being paranoid.

But what if?

She still remembered the day Stephanie left in vivid detail. She had just finished her third novel, and had taken a working vacation to see Sam and the boys while she was in the city promoting the book and doing a few signings. Matthew had been maybe a year old then, and Emily and Arthur hadn't gotten to meet him yet. Arthur had been so excited to meet his new baby brother, but thankfully jet lag had kept him at the hotel that day.

She had just meant to pop in for a moment between her plane landing and her first signing. It was supposed to be a short visit to give Stephanie some respite. She knew how exhausting being home alone all day with a baby could be, and she genuinely liked Stephanie back then. Patience's loss had hit Sam hard, and she was happy he was happy again.

No one had answered her knock, though she could hear the TV from inside. She tried again, but there was still no answer. Turning to leave, though, she had heard Matthew give out a wail. Worried that something had happened and Stephanie or one of the boys was hurt, Emily had tried the door and found it unlocked. What she had found inside still haunted her.

Stephanie sat on the couch with a glass pipe in her hand, holding it over the flame of a lighter as she watched the smoke curling inside of it intently. Alfred's tiny, grubby hands reached for a sandwich baggy full of crystal shards lying on the low coffee table. From his place perched precariously on the couch, Matthew wailed futilely for his mother's attention.

The world ground to a halt for a second as she processed what she was seeing. Then, in a flash, Emily snatched Alfred away from the meth on the table and turned on Stephanie, the deep fear that had frozen her turning into anger. "What the bloody fuck do you think you're doing!?" She screeched.

"Emily?" Stephanie asked, her jaw working like she was trying to stretch out her muscles, but she couldn't seem to stop. Emily had clutched Alfred to her, chest heaving and pulse racing. All she could see in that moment was his cold, dead little body. And Stephanie, still sitting on the couch getting high.

"Get out." She had rasped, eyes glassy and wild. Stephanie had opened her mouth to say something and some part of Emily had snapped. All she remembered was black at the edges of her vision as she screamed at her again to get out. She remembered later that she had tossed \$500 in her face and told her if she ever came back, she would kill her.

She'd sat there with the boys until Sam came home, cancelling her book signing. A friend dropped Arthur off when he woke up, and she made excuses for Stephanie and let her son play with his brothers for a while while she desperately tried to think of something to tell Sam. Ultimately, she decided on a compromise. Tell Sam the truth, lie to the boys.

It had worked. Alfred forgot all about the drugs as far as any of them could tell, and Matthew grew up entirely unaware of the woman his mother really was. Until Emily had let yer misplaced guilt get in the way and ruin everything. And now he was missing, and she had no clue if Stephanie had any involvement.

If she didn't find out, it would drive her up the wall. Not knowing if she had sealed Matt's fate would eat her away from the inside, especially if anything happened to him. And if Stephanie was involved, she might have information that would help Arthur find him. Making up her mind, Emily grabbed her keys and her phone and rushed over to the dilapidated house she had found her in.

It took a few moments for Stephanie to open the door. When she finally did, Alarm bells began going off in Emily's head. Her dirty face was tear-streaked, and her eyes were glassy and wide like she was high again. Something had upset her, and Emily had a sinking feeling she knew what.

"Emily?" She asked, obviously confused, her eyes darting around like she expected someone to be with her. "What are you doing here?"

"Maybe we should do this inside." She said tersely, brushing brusquely past the woman into the house. She had no interest in making a scene on the front lawn, and she had no idea how messy things would have to get.

"Matthew's missing." She said as Stephanie closed the door, turning to look at her with hard eyes. Stephanie's gaze slid from her face and she turned around to avoid looking at Emily. A guilty conscience was no good sign. Emily clenched her jaw and narrowed her eyes, watching her as she crossed the room towards the kitchen. She stopped abruptly on the threshold with a wince, seeming to think better of leaving the living room.

"I never called him. I never had any intention to. I don't know that kid, and I never wanted to be a mother." She scoffed, crossing her arms over her chest and still refusing to look Emily in the eye. "I never asked you to give me his number, and it's not my problem you felt guilty for driving me out, you self-important snob." She sneered, finally turning around to face Emily with a look of contempt.

Emily snarled and grabbed the other woman by the front of her shirt, forcing her back until she had her pressed bodily against the wall. "Do you know what happens to a toddler when they eat a whole bag of meth, Stephanie? Because if I hadn't come in when I did, you would know first hand." She told her, her voice a deep growl. Stephanie stared at her with frightened eyes, her pupils blown and hyperfocused. "You would know exactly which shade of blue Alfred's little face would have turned when he died." Her own voice hitched as she said it, still unable to bear the thought. "So if getting you as far away from him and Matthew as possible to protect them makes me a snob, so be it!"

"I don't know anything about Matt!" She insisted, ignoring the truth she was unable to handle. She struggled against Emily, but she was coming down off of a bender and hadn't slept in days. Her strength failed her, and she flailed uselessly against the other woman.

"You're lying!" Emily snarled, slamming her head back against the wall. It gave Emily a small, dangerous thrill. Like she was in an action movie, shaking down a criminal for information. The revenge felt sweet, too. Years of Matt's life spent crying over her when she didn't deserve it, the broken look on Sam's face when he got home, Emily's own lingering guilt...it felt nice to pay her back for it all.

"I'm not, I swear!" Stephanie said, starting to sob. Emily didn't let up, slamming her head into the wall a few more times for good measure. She was probably going too far now, but it just felt so good. The solid thunk of her head against the wall was satisfying in a way few other things were.

"Where is he?" She asked again, voice low and deadly.

"I don't know!" She insisted. "I don't know where they took him, I swear!" She sobbed, trying to wriggle free of Emily's grip. "They just told me to get him over here. I get him over here, and they take care of it. I didn't....I don't know where they are, I swear!" She was crying openly now, going slack in Emily's grip and shaking her head like it was a bad dream she could make go away.

"Who?" Emily asked. "And don't you dare lie to me."

"The Red Dragons! They wanted him, I don't know why. Please, just don't hurt me!" She begged, her terrified sobs setting Emily's teeth on edge. She let her go and backed up. For a moment, she felt guilty. She had always told the boys violence wasn't always the answer. But, she reminded herself, sometimes it was. And it seemed to have worked well enough this time.

"If they hurt him, Stephanie, I will kill you. And don't delude yourself into thinking Sam and the boys wouldn't help me hide you." She told her, eerily calm. She realized in that moment that she wasn't lying. Stephanie had her one second chance. It was war, now.

"Oh, and one more thing." She said, stalking up to her. She smiled dangerously and cocked her fist back, slamming it into Stephanie's cheek.

"He was never your son." She said, staring down at where she had knocked the other woman to the floor. Stephanie looked up at her with bugged out eyes full of tears, fear etched into every line of her face. That small thrill went through her again, and she couldn't help but smirk despite the pain in her knuckles.

"He's always been mine." She turned and stalked out the door, leaving Stephanie sobbing on the ground clutching her face. She hurried to her car before the adrenaline could wear off and the regret could seep back in. Her hands were still shaking as she called her son.

"Arthur?" She asked as he picked up the phone, starting the car and peeling out of the driveway. "I have some information on Matthew. Yes, I can swing by the precinct. I'll be right there." She hung up the phone and tossed it into the passenger seat, carding a hand through her hair as she took off in the direction of the station.

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The bedroom door clicked shut as Alfred closed it carefully behind him. He had shut down outside of the warehouse, closing off the panic and falling into a dazed stupor that shattered the second the door was closed. He leaned heavily against it, sinking down and hugging his knees to his chest. He felt like he was swimming through mud, his limbs heavy and hard to move, his thoughts sluggish. It all still felt like a bad, bad dream.

But when he woke up tomorrow morning, Leon would still have Matt and Natasha. That was no dream. His baby brother...what had he done? How in the hell was he supposed to fix this? If they went through with this, there was no going back. If they didn't, Matt and Natasha were dead.

"What are we gonna do?" He asked, his voice shaking and thick with emotion. Ivan pressed his lips together, not certain how to answer that question. He had a plan, one he had known he would carry out the second Alfred fell to his knees outside of the warehouse. But he knew Alfred would argue and he wasn't sure if he should tell him.

Looking at Alfred, his eyes wet and wide with panic, he made his decision. He sighed and sat down next to him, pulling him gently so his head rested on Ivan's shoulder. Running a comforting hand up and down Alfred's arm like he would often do for his sisters when they were upset, he looked to the heavens for guidance.

"It's going to be okay, Alfred." Ivan told him, laying his head on Alfred's soft hair "I'll take care of it." Alfred pulled away and looking at him, searching his face for a moment with a deep frown.

"Ivan, what are you planning?" He asked, concern etched on every line of his face. Ivan just shrugged, looking away. Alfred didn't back down, grabbing Ivan's chin and forcing him to meet his eyes "What are you going to do?" He asked again, more firmly.

"I'm going to kill Kiku Honda, get our siblings back, leave a signed statement and a recording stating that you told me not to take the deal and did no killing, and then I'm going to run. I'll go back to Russia and lay low. I know people there, people who will hide me or look the other way." He told him defiantly, daring him to object.

"Ivan, no! What if you get caught leaving? What about your sisters?" He asked, grabbing Ivan's arm hard enough to bruise, trying subconsciously to hold him in place.

"You're going to take care of them for me." He said, trying to smile through the ache in his chest. "Natasha has dual citizenship, so Katya should be allowed to stay as her guardian. Help her get a job, even if it's just cooking for your tasteless brother, or cleaning your pig sty of an apartment." He teased, trying to get a laugh.

It hadn't had the intended effect. Tears were now streaming down Alfred's face as he took on big gulps of air, nodding and shaking his head in turns as he tried to find his voice again. He wiped his eyes and took a deep breath, finally managing to control himself.

"Of course! You didn't even have to ask." He told him, hiding his face in Ivan's shoulder. "I'd never let them deport her, Ivan. You know that." Ivan grabbed his hand, lacing their fingers together. He held onto it like a lifeline, desperate for something to tether him down in this chaos. Ivan's hand was warm and rough, a strong anchor.

"I know." He soothed quietly, burying his nose in Alfred's hair. He smelled like cypress and cedar wood, and the scent calmed him. He had always wanted to ask Alfred which shampoo he used. He had never stopped to consider why he liked it so much before, that it might just be because he wanted Alfred close.. He had been so blind, so stubborn. And now it was really too late, he had missed his last chance to do anything about that confusing need for closeness. All he could do was make the most of the end.

"I have something else I wanted to say." Ivan began, pulling back and carding his fingers through his hair nervously.

"What is it?" Alfred asked, his heart giving a strange little thump in his chest he didn't know how to interpret.

"You....thank you." Ivan began, worrying his lip. "You've been a better partner than I've ever given you credit for. You're strong, you're smart, you're observant, and funny, and you're a good cop." He stopped, searching for the words to express himself and coming up short in every language he knew.

"Ivan, this sounds a lot like goodbye." Alfred said, clutching the front of his shirt like he could keep him there through sheer force of will.

"Isn't it?" Ivan said, chuckling sardonically and shaking his head in sadness and resignation. "Just let me finish."

"Maybe I don't want you to finish." Alfred said stubbornly, grabbing him by his collar and pulling him into a harsh, bruising kiss.

Ivan didn't even think about pulling away this time, tangling his fingers in Alfred's hair and taking control of the kiss to prove it. It turned from a thing of harsh desperation to something slower and sweeter. Lingering for a moment after ending the kiss, he gazed into Alfred's eyes. He'd never quite noticed before exactly how blue they were, like a summer sky or a clear lake.

"Let me say goodbye the right way, then." He whispered, pressing their lips together in a short, chaste kiss. "I don't know what to say, anyway." He huffed softly. 6 languages and no words, how ironic.

Alfred pulled away, shaking his head. "I don't think I can do this again." He told him, pushing up his glasses and pressing his hands to his eyes. "Last time, I thought...and then..." He shook his head again. "Everything's so confusing right now. I don't need you pulling another 180 on me."

Ivan took Alfred's wrists and gently coaxed him into lowering his hands so he could hold them in his own. "It was confusing before because I was confused." He admitted, tracing his thumbs over Alfred's knuckles. "I'm not confused anymore. And if I'm going to die tomorrow, I'm not going to die lying to myself."

"So it's about you and your weird closet thing?" Alfred accused. "And what am I in all of this?" He asked. Ivan thought maybe he was trying to pick a fight because he was scared.

"You're my truth." He said plainly, kissing Alfred again. It was as simple and sweet as the last ones, melting like sugar on Alfred's tongue. He was starting to find it difficult to resist, and he questioned why he even wanted to. He was the one who had cornered Ivan into coming out in the first place, wasn't he?

"That," he said breathlessly, looking up into Ivan's eyes, "Was the lamest thing I've ever heard." He shook his head in disbelief. "I mean, seriously? I get that English is your second language, but did you really think that cheesy ass line would play well?" He asked, incredulous. "I take back what I said about you needing to watch more movies. You clearly-" Ivan cut him off with another kiss, chuckling.

"Shut up, Alik." He purred, kissing down his partner's jaw to his throat. Alfred gasped slightly and let the words die in his throat, tilting his head to allow Ivan more access. "I don't think you need to be plied with smooth lines and candlelight, hm?" He teased, doing something with his tongue that made Alfred gasp.

"If we survive this, you better fucking believe I'm getting smooth lines and candlelight, just because you said that." Alfred told him, pushing him sternly away from his neck and pouting.

"If we survive this, I will give you smooth lines and candlelight every day for a month." Ivan promised, nuzzling into the crook of Alfred's neck to coax him into giving him access again. But Alfred froze, pushing Ivan back so he could study his face seriously.

"Don't make promises you can't keep, Braginsky." He said, face grave and stern. "If this is one time, tell me now. I'd rather die knowing it was a scared comfort fuck than live and find

out the hard way."

Ivan shook his head and drew Alfred close, pressing their foreheads together. "I don't want to fuck you." He told him, smiling gently. "I want to make love to you "

Alfred hit him with a deadpan, unamused look. "Honestly, I'd do anything at this point to get you to stop using those lame, awful lines." Ivan laughed and kissed him again.

"Ah, ah, ah. You already said you wanted smooth lines." He reminded him playfully.

"Yeah. Smooth lines. Not...whatever it is you think you're saying." Alfred snorted he realized in that moment that Ivan had, with his lame moves and corny lines, somehow managed to make him forget all about the situation they were in and the danger all around them.

"Maybe you'll have to teach me, then." Ivan said, hooking a finger under his chin and tilting his head up so he was staring directly into mesmerizing purple eyes.

"Damnit." Alfred cursed softly, his heart giving a small flutter in his chest.

"What?" Ivan asked, confused.

"Forget the lines, that was way sexier." He laughed, winding his arms around Ivan's shoulders and kissing him again. "Alright, you convinced me." He said with a long, over-exaggerated sigh.

"Convinced you of what?" Ivan asked, running a hand up and down Alfred's back, a teasing smirk on his face.

"To run away to cloud cuckooland with you. What did you think I meant?" Alfred said sarcastically.

"That you would let me make love to you." Ivan said earnestly, running the pad of his thumb over Alfred's jaw. Alfred melted in an instant, all the sarcastic humor he had been using to keep Ivan at bay crashing down around him.

"Okay." He said, looking away to avoid the intensity in Ivan's eyes. Ivan gently turned his head so they were face to face again.

"Okay." agreed Ivan, pulling Alfred into a kiss that was as slow as the ones before it but sensual where those had been sweet, open-mouthed where they had been close-lipped. Alfred felt a spark ignite in his gut, the slow burning fire that Ivan stoked with every brush of his tongue against Alfred's.

Ivan pulled away and Alfred chased his lips, not understanding why the space where Ivan had been was empty. Ivan chuckled and got up, holding out a hand to drag Alfred with him. He led him to the bed, gently urging him to sit. He knelt between his legs, reaching up to cup Alfred's face.

"I never told you last time." He said, staring at Alfred almost reverently as he brushed a thumb across his bottom lip.

"Told me what?" Alfred asked, his face and chest warm as his heart beat a staccato rhythm against his chest.

"How beautiful you are." Ivan murmured, pulling him into a kiss that curled Alfred's toes and sent licks of flame crawling through his limbs. He moaned against Ivan's lips, tangling his fingers in his hair.

Alfred was the one to break the kiss this time, dizzy with lack of air and abundance of stimulation. He stared at Ivan with dark, hazy eyes, licking kiss swollen lips as he caught his breath. Wordlessly, he pulled Ivan up from between his knees to stand. His partner stared down at him with that strange intensity that shot through him like a laser, burning him. He felt open and vulnerable under that gaze, and he looked away in discomfort.

He glanced back up at him for a moment as he reached for the button of his pants, asking permission. Ivan granted it with a light hand on his hair and a glint in his eyes that made Alfred shiver with anticipation.

He popped the button and drew Ivan's zipper down, taking a shaky breath as he reached inside and pulled Ivan's dick out of its confines. He had been so eager to get him into bed last time that he hadn't really stopped to appreciate just how damn big Ivan was. He stroked him a few times, feeling him grow beneath his hand.

Alfred glanced up at Ivan and almost immediately regretted it, the heat in his eyes scorching Alfred down to his bones. Ivan looked at him like he had whole galaxies in his eyes and it scared him, to be seen like that. He felt like an open book that Ivan had been dying to read, finally taken down off of the shelf. It was awesome in the biblical sense, terrifying and exciting at the same time.

He placed a kiss on the head of Ivan's cock, taking it in and suckling softly. Ivan groaned and carded his fingers through Alfred's hair. Emboldened, he took more of him in, closing his eyes as he relaxed his throat. He took what he couldn't swallow in his hand, stroking and massaging the flesh. Ivan was too big to take everything, and Alfred was struggling with whatbhe already had.

Ivan couldn't take his eyes off the beautiful sight beneath him. Alfred's mouth was hot and wet, his lips cherry red and kiss swollen around his cock. He watched as the head of his cock slipped in and out between those pretty red lips, his grip on Alfred's hair tightening.

He pulled him off as soon as he was fully hard, knowing it would only get harder to resist cumming on his beautiful face. The thought of his cum splashing across his lightly freckled cheeks and those plump, red lips made him shudder. He shelved the idea for later and swooped down to kiss Alfred, tasting himself on his tongue.

"Why did we stop?" Alfred asked when he pulled back, meeting his eyes. A deep chuckle rumbled in Ivan's chest as his partner blushed and looked away again. Something had made him shy all of a sudden, and Ivan couldn't bring himself to complain.

"Lay back." He said in answer, pulling off his coat and shirt and kicking off his pants. Alfred started to follow suit, but Ivan stopped him. A questioning look, an answering smirk, and

Alfred laid back like he had been told.

Ivan stood over him, eyes roving over every inch of the beautiful figure laid out before him. He knelt on the bed between Alfred's legs, leering at him from above. He placed his hands on Alfred's knees, smoothing his palms down Alfred's thighs and up under his shirt. He jumped slightly as Ivan's cold hands came into contact with the sensitive skin of his stomach, but stilled. The shyness was gone now, or hidden under the expectant curiosity he was now gazing openly at Ivan with.

"We should have done this sooner." He said, murmuring to himself.

"We did, remember? It wasn't that long ago." Alfred said, snorting and rolling his eyes. Ivan chuckled and shook his head, tweaking one of Alfred's nipples.

"No," He corrected him, leaning over Alfred and tracing feather-light fingers over his ribs. "That was something very different." Alfred gazed up at him, purple flooding his senses as he finally understood why Ivan had been looking at him like that. There were whole galaxies swimming in Ivan's eyes, too.

"Yeah." He said, breathless and awed by the feeling in the air he couldn't put a name to. "It was."

He leaned up on his elbows, tangling his fingers in the hair at the back of Ivan's head and pulled him down into a searing kiss. Electricity zapped through him, the gasp from the shock opening his mouth to Ivan's exploring tongue once more.

Alfred felt a tug on his shirt and he pulled away, letting Ivan pull it over his head. Chest to chest, they came back together, lips locked and tongues dancing. Ivan's hands slipped down the back of Alfred's pants, palming his bare flesh. His head rolled back as he arched into Ivan, and his partner swooped into the opening he had left, kissing and biting his way down his throat.

Feeling Alfred against him, bare flesh finally meeting hare flesh, had blasted away the last remnants of Ivan's patience. Pushing Alfred back down onto the bed, he made quick work of his pants. Between Alfred's long, lithe legs, looking down at his gorgeous body, Ivan had to concentrate very, very hard on not burying himself immediately inside of him.

"Do we have anything?" He asked, stroking his cock to relieve a little bit of the buildings tension. Rolling over, Alfred rummaged through the nightstand and grabbed a bottle of lube. He popped the cap and put out his hand, but Ivan snatched it with a smirk.

"I believe that's my job." He said, squeezing a generous amount onto his fingers and rubbing it between them to warm it. "Spread your legs." He said, tracing the crack of his ass with his middle finger. Alfred obeyed, spreading wide to give Ivan room to work.

The first finger went in easily enough, to no surprise. A tiny hitch of breath was the only sign Alfred gave that he even felt it, a deep flush settling across his cheeks. Ivan watched his face for those little tics and expressions as he pumped the finger in and out of him. A beautiful symphony of pleasure played across his face as Ivan slipped another finger in and hooked

them up to catch his prostate. It was mesmerizing, drawing Ivan in and locking his gaze in place.

"More!" Alfred gasped, bucking his hips onto his fingers. Groaning, Ivan wondered what he had done to deserve this. He started to stretch Alfred out, scissoring his fingers as he worked them in and out of him. When he was ready, a third finger joined the others. Alfred gasped, this time in slight discomfort.

"Are you okay?" Ivan asked, stopping. Alfred nodded emphatically and pushed down onto his fingers again.

"Don't stop!" He demanded, working his hips on Ivan's hand. Ivan let him go for a moment, too caught up in the sight of Alfred fucking himself on his fingers to stop him. Snapping out of it, he put a firm hand on Alfred's hip. A dismayed whimper was his reward as Alfred tried to get more friction despite the obstacle.

"You're doing my job again." He said, pressing his fingers up into him and rubbing his prostate directly. Alfred arched sharply off of the bed with a cry, eyes squeezing shut as Ivan pleased him. "Maybe you need to be reminded why it's my job." he said. Licking his lips, Ivan pressed harder and watched as Alfred's whole body jerked. He stimulated that spot relentlessly, hungrily devouring the sight of Alfred's ecstasy with his eyes.

"Please!" Alfred begged, panting like he had just run a mile. "Stop, I'm gonna cum." Ivan felt his balls constrict at the mental image of Alfred coming just from being fingered. He took a deep breath to steady himself, pulling his fingers out of Alfred. He gave them both a minute to calm down before grabbing the lube and spreading a good amount on his painfully hard cock.

He couldn't remember ever wanting it this badly. The sheer force of his arousal threatened to drown him as he lined the head up with Alfred's hole and pushed in slowly. No woman had ever made his head spin like this, or made him lose control like this gorgeous, dedicated, intelligent, funny, amazing man beneath him.

Alfred dug his fingers into the sheets and squeezed Ivan's waist between his thighs as he felt the delicious, burning stretch of Ivan entering him. He looked up at him through the haze of pleasure and smiled, bringing him down into another kiss. They took it slowly, mapping each other's mouths carefully as Ivan gave gentle, languid thrusts to open Alfred up.

He gasped as the head of his cock brushed his prostate, throwing his head back and tangling his fingers in Ivan's hair. Ivan didn't waver from his gentle, testing pace even as he held Alfred's hips in a bruising grip. Every so often, Ivan would brush against that bundle of nerves, setting him on fire, but his thrusts stayed long and slow.

"Faster!" He demanded, attempting to pull Ivan inward with his legs. Ivan laced their fingers together and kissed his knuckles, giving a firmer thrust that buried him to the hilt. Alfred groaned and squeezed his hand, head falling back against the pillow.

The pace picked up, building momentum as the desire for each other outpaced the desire to be careful. A chorus of moans and gasps spilled from Alfred, and Ivan had to bury his face in

Alfred's neck. The sights and the sounds and the sensations were all too much to take together. His breathing grew ragged, his thrusts wild and powerful. He wanted to bury himself so far deep inside of Alfred that they merged, and the thought scared him.

"I'm gonna cum." Alfred warned him, breathless and husky. He licked the shell of Ivan's ear, nails pressing crescent moon shaped divets in the skin of his back. "I wanna make you cum first." He admitted, squeezing himself around Ivan. His partner's deep, desperate groan rumbled against Alfred's neck and he shivered, holding back a small whimper. "Cum inside of me, Ivan. " He coaxed. "Fill me up."

Ivan's mind blanked out as he grabbed Alfred's cock and started jerking it, driving two more bone-jarring thrusts into Alfred. The edges of his vision went dim as he fired spurt after spurt into him in the most intense orgasm of his adult life. Driving himself deeper still, he held Alfred's hips firmly against his own as he filled him, grinning fiercely as some leaked out around him. Alfred cried out his name and came undone, jerking and twitching as he came all over Ivan's hand.

They didn't part for a long moment, Ivan savoring the feeling of being inside of his new lover while Alfred enjoyed being filled. Finally, Ivan pulled out, Alfred gasping and biting his lip as his release came out after him.

"Doesn't that feel gross?" Ivan asked, frowning. He couldn't imagine letting another man cum in him. The idea of it leaking out afterwards....eugh.

"Fuck no." Alfred laughed. "It feels fucking amazing." He said, reaching down between his legs to push it back in. Ivan watched, slack jawed, and wondered if he was capable of getting hard again so soon. He pressed Alfred back down onto the bed again, kissing him breathless.

"Careful, tiger, you might just get what you want." Alfred purred, scratching lightly down his back.

"As much as I would love to fill you up again, you little cumslut, I don't think either of us could deliver right now." He teased, flopping back down onto the bed and pulling Alfred partially on top of him. "It's been a long night, and we have something to do tomorrow. We should sleep." He said, pulling the covers over them and pressing a soft kiss to Alfred's forehead.

"Mmm, okay. But you owe me round two in the morning, you tease." Alfred said, voice already starting to slur as he began to drift off. Ivan smiled softly and kissed his forehead again, the warmth in his chest making him wonder what exactly this new thing between them would have been if it had been given a chance.

"As many rounds as you want." He promised, switching off the light and wrapping his arms around the sleeping man. He buried his face in his hair, inhaling the scent of cedar and cypress and steeling himself to say goodbye.

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

All good things must come to an end.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Bright, early morning sunlight lit up the room in a dazzling glow, Alfred's hair catching the light and bursting into a golden halo. Ivan breathed it in deeply, the warm strands tickling his nose as he wrapped his arms around Alfred and nuzzled into his neck. "Good morning, Alik." He said, kissing his shoulder.

"Mmmmmorning." Alfred hummed, stretching languidly as he propped himself up on one arm and pressed a sweet, chaste kiss to Ivan's lips. As he pulled away, Ivan caught his chin and brought him back for another.

"You know, if we find a way out of this one of us is going to have to transfer departments." He said, pulling back from the kiss just far enough to gaze into his eyes. Unable to help himself, Alfred wound his arms around Ivan's shoulders and kissed him again. They both knew the chances of that were slim, but it felt good to talk about the impossible after instead of thinking about the inevitable now.

"I know. I probably shouldn't be working with my brother anyway, to be honest." He said, snorting. "We got away with it 'cause nepotism, but dad won't be as understanding of me working with my boyfriend." He sighed. He wasn't too upset about it, but the paperwork would be annoying.

A grin spread over Ivan's face, feeling warmth spread through his chest. Alfred had called him his boyfriend. He pulled Alfred into another long kiss, threading his fingers into his hair. It was so soft, and slid through his fingertips like strands of water. He wondered idly if Alfred would consider growing it out a bit.

"What're you over there grinnin' 'bout?" Alfred asked, his own lips curling up at the corners. His smile was interesting, Ivan thought, in that there were so many of them. He wanted to see them all. He wanted to see every expression Alfred could make.

"You." Ivan told him, wrapping an arm around his waist and pulling him close.

"Me? You think I'm funny?" He asked, a mock pout on his face.

"I think you're amazing." He said softly, pressing their lips together again. He grabbed Alfred and rolled so Alfred was straddling him, the blankets pooling around his hips.

"You're just trying to butter me up so I'll have sex with you." Alfred accused, teasing.

"Oh, I don't think I have to butter you up for that." Ivan said, chuckling and leaning up to bring him into a kiss. "If I recall correctly, I owe you a round two anyway." He reminded him, nipping his bottom lip.

A knock at the door jolted them out of their morning after bliss.

Alfred grumbled to himself as he clambered off of Ivan and started pulling on his clothes. Groaning, Ivan slumped back onto the bed and scrubbed a hand over his face before rising to join him. If this wasn't something of utmost importance, he was going to kill whoever was at the door.

Im Yong Soo stood alone in the living room, examining the mediocre landscape prints that adorned the walls. When Alfred appeared at the top of the stairs, he turned to look at him with cold, disinterested eyes. The hair on the back of Alfred's neck stood on end, and he stopped where he was.

"What are you doing here?" He asked, stopping Ivan as he came up behind him.

"Boss wants to see you." Im said, seeming bored. They waited for more of an explanation, but none came. Silence reigned as Ivan and Alfred waited for Mei and the muscle to pop out from behind something.

"Where are the others?" Ivan asked, hand gripping the rail a little tighter than necessary.

"Mei had business. Honda sent me. Got a problem with that?" Im answered, raising his eyebrow in a challenge. Ivan scowled, fist tightening on the rail again. Laying a hand on his arm, Alfred watched Yong Soo carefully.

"Why did he send you alone?" He asked, careful to keep his voice level. "If Honda thinks we're just going to let you drug us-"

"No need, this time." Im Yong said, raising a hand to stop him. "Not going to his house."

They came the rest of the way down the stairs, knowing that to resist at this point would be to cast needless suspicion on their every move. Im had an unassuming white import sitting behind the SUV waiting for them. Deciding that it was better to stay together and marginally apart from Yong Soo, they climbed in the back seat.

Their hands stayed linked the whole ride, their grips both iron tight and their knuckles white. If it was just them, Honda, and Yong Soo it could be their chance and they both knew it. Neither of them were ready for life on the run, or prison. They had hoped to have a bit more time. Alfred leaned on Ivan's shoulder and reminded himself he was doing this for Matt. As long as Matt and Natalia made it home safe, everything that happened after was worth it.

Yong Soo pulled up to a squat building with dingy windows that looked like it might have once been a school, or a church. It was obviously some sort of office building now, though

the overgrown planter boxes and trash littering the lawn spoke to vacancy. They picked their way across a cracked, half-uprooted parking lot, careful of the glass strewn around.

The inside of the building was musty and damp-smelling, like it had been abandoned after a flood and left to go to dust and ruin. The carpet was the coarse, flat kind you find in offices around the world, stained and dirty from years of being walked on with no maintenance. As they descended into the basement the smell got stronger, to the point where Alfred started breathing through his mouth.

They were led down a long hallway lined with doors that sat as silent as a grave. The hairs on Alfred's neck stood up, and his fingers twitched for want of a gun. There was something unsettling about abandoned places. If there weren't ghosts then why did the people leave?

At the last door on the left, they stopped. Ivan slipped his hand into Alfred's and squeezed, his heart hammering against his ribs as he discreetly flipped the safety off of the pistol on his belt. Silent as it was in this dust museum, he doubted Honda had many people with him. If he just shot him and worried about his lackeys after, maybe he could do this. He took a stabilizing breath as Yong Soo opened the door, subtly shifting so he was between Alfred and whoever was behind it.

But the office was empty.

"What's the meaning of this?" Ivan asked, his voice a roll of thunder, pointing his gun at Im's head. Unperturbed, Yong Soo put his hands up in placid surrender.

"Calm down, Ivan. There's no need for violence." He assured him, his voice slipping from the broad, nasal flatness of American English to the more clipped, lighter tones of British English. "I assure you, this is all simply a misunderstanding. A misunderstanding admittedly of my own design, but there you have it."

"How do you know who I am?" Ivan asked, eyes flashing. His gun never wavered from the spot between Im's eyebrows. "Do you work for Leon?"

"Leon Chun? Bloody hell, no! Can you imagine?" He scoffed. "My name is Agent Henry Kim, I'm with Interpol's art theft division. We've been monitoring a few key members of both the Red Dragons and the Rising Sun for years now, tracking stolen artifacts from all over East and Southeast Asia."

Ivan slowly lowered his gun, shocked, as Agent Kim rounded the desk, opened a drawer, and took out his badge.

"You'll understand why I didn't keep this on me, I hope?" Kim asked, actually seeming a little sheepish.

"Why are you telling us this now?" Alfred asked, holstering his gun and grabbing the badge to examine it.

"I happen to be mates with your brother, actually. He's been our contact with local authorities, only one I would trust. I think that's the only reason he agreed to lend you to this mission,

actually. He knew I would be here." Kim chuckled. "He also knew my investigation was over, and that you were in trouble and needed my help now that I could give it."

"Wait. How did he know I was in trouble?" Alfred asked, confused.

"Matthew's been taken. By the Red Dragons." Came a new voice from the doorway. Alfred turned to see Arthur taking off a brown wig hiding his bright blonde hair. A well of emotion rose in Alfred's throat and for a moment he held himself back, clenching his fist and trying not to run to his big brother. But the second Arthur opened his arms, Alfred ran into them, throwing himself bodily at his brother and squeezing him tight.

"It's alright, Al." Arthur said softly, rubbing his back. They stepped away from each other, Arthur clapping Alfred's shoulder affectionately.

"We knew Matthew was gone." Ivan said, leaning up against the desk and allowing the two their space. "Leon Chun has him, and my sister. He said if we don't kill Honda, he'll kill them." Pursing his lips, he gripped the desk to control the black rage clouding his heart.

"That shouldn't be a problem." Agent Kim said cheerfully. "Having him in custody makes him particularly easy to locate."

"We're not killing Honda, Henry." Arthur said sternly.

"We don't have to." Ivan pointed out. "A few staged pictures, a relatively fresh finger from the morgue, cooperation from news outlets, and good performances from Alfred and myself and we can catch him in a sting."

"Exactly." Kim said loftily, smirking at Arthur.

Arthur rolled his eyes and pressed a button on the phone sitting on the desk. "Did you get that, dad?" He asked.

"I'll make the arrangements. Get Al and Braginsky wires and set up the meeting. I want Matt back in time for dinner, that's an order." Sam Jones' gruff voice came through the speaker.

"Yes, sir!" They chorused, the line going dead.

"You heard the Chief, Detective Jones. Call Chun and set up the meeting." Arthur told him, picking the phone up to make a few more calls. "Henry, give Ivan your keys. You're coming back with me."

"Yes, sir." The chorus went around again as Alfred dialed the number Leon had given him. It picked up on the second ring.

"Detective Jones. I take it you have good news for me?" He asked with no preamble.

"It's done." He ground out, channeling the real rage he felt. "I did my part, you do yours. Let Matt and Natalia go."

"Very well. Meet me tonight at midnight, the same place as before. You bring me proof of death, I bring you your siblings. Don't be late." He said, the line going dead with a beep as soon as he was done talking.

"Tonight at midnight, in a warehouse across the street from Gilbert's nightclub." He told Agent Kim, knowing he would know where that was. Henry nodded and shooed him out of the door, dialing a number on his own phone. Arthur absently tossed him two wires and two bullet proof vests and echoed Kim's shooing motion. Leaning over to peck his brother on the cheek just to fuck with him, Alfred practically skipped up the stairs to the exit, dragging Ivan with him.

"We're gonna get them back, Ivan!" He said right before he opened the door, in the last moment before he had to act like he had just done something reprehensible. Hope shone out of his eyes like a brilliant sun.

"Yeah." Ivan agreed, forcing a smile to his face that he didn't feel. They were nowhere near out of the woods yet, but he couldn't bring himself to bring Alfred down. He let him have his hope, even if he couldn't share it.

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Natalia stared down at the cornflower pendant in her hand. It was the first time she'd taken it off since Ivan had put it around her neck the day he left. Tears filled her eyes as she wondered where he was and if he was okay. He had said he was going to kill someone! What if they put him in jail forever? Then she would never see him again. Like she never saw her Mama and Papa again.

"Mr. Matt?" She asked, looking over at him. "Do you think heaven is real?" Matt blinked at her and sat up, thinking for a moment.

"I'm not sure. Maybe it is, maybe not. I like to think it is, though. Or something like it, where we get to go and see everyone we've ever loved and missed and be with them forever." He said. Then he looked at her, frowning slightly. "Natalia, we're not going to die. I promise, honey. I won't let anything happen to you."

"I know." Natalia said, shrugging her shoulders and sighing. "I was thinking about my parents." She admitted.

"Natalia....I'm sure-" He was cut off by the bar on the outside of the door sliding heavily out of place. Natasha scrambled to his side, clinging fearfully to the only grown up she could trust right now.

The men advanced on them, and Matt held her tight. But they were bigger and stronger than he was, and she was torn away from him with one quick yank. Natasha cried out, reaching for Matthew, but her hands were grabbed and tied behind her back, a bag shoved over her head. She put up only minimal resistance, the goose egg on her head a tender reminder of the consequences.

"Time for another ride, kids." The man who had struck Natalia said as they were loaded into the van. "Last one, too, aren't you lucky? Your pig brothers really came through for you." He barked out a laugh, shutting them in. Natalia started to cry.

"Shhh, it'll be okay." Matt assured her, though the fear in his own voice did little to sooth hers. "My brother would never, ever let anything bad happen to yours. I promise. And I'll help, too. I work for a law firm. I'll get him the best lawyer he can get. Everything will be okay." Natalia kept crying, not comforted at all.

"Hey! Keep that brat quiet!" One of the men yelled from the front, banging on the metal grate. Natalia gave a little sob and quieted herself, though the tears kept falling. It made the sack on her head uncomfortably damp around her neck, which just made her want to cry more.

"It'll be okay, Natasha. Just stay calm, like we talked about. It's okay to be scared, but you have to stay calm right now." He coaxed her gently. Slowly, the hiccuppy little breaths she had been drawing smoothed out. Mr. Matt was a grown up, that meant that he knew a lot more than she did. So if he said things would be okay, then they would be okay.

She really, really hoped he was right.

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Stephanie stared at the pipe in her hand, watching the smoke curl through it as she held the lighter to the bulb. She had called for another sack as soon as Emily had left, and it had been there within 15 minutes. At least the service was speedy.

She tossed the lighter on the bed and watched the smoke curl. His eyes weren't blue.

That had been the first thing she'd noticed. That his eyes weren't really blue; she had forgotten. They were a dark blue-violet that she'd only ever seen on one other person. Matthew looked so much like her father that it had almost brought her to her knees on the porch. She hadn't been able to look at him in the kitchen, knowing that facing her father's eyes in her son's face would kill her.

She flung the pipe across the room, the smoke dispersing in a puff as it shattered against the wall. A broken sob tore itself out of her throat as she curled in on herself, wondering what her life had become. What kind of person sold their own child for drugs?

It was his fault, she told herself sternly. He was the one who was naive enough to fall for that bullshit about wanting to make it up to him. She was blameless. It wasn't her fault, it was Emily's for driving her away. It was Matthew's for coming when she called. It was Sam's and Alfred's for teaching him the world was kind and fair. But not her's, never hers.

She grabbed her keys off the table and stalked out towards her car. She would have to go buy another pipe now, thanks to Matthew. It wasn't her fault, it wasn't! She fumbled with the keys a bit as she tried to unlock the car, her hands shaking uncontrollably.

By chance, she glanced up at her window. The distorted reflection of a man stood behind her, a menacing shadow in the background. She turned to ask what he wanted, but didn't even manage to get a sound out before there came a sharp blow to her head, then darkness.

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Music and light pulsed outwards from the nightclub as Ivan and Alfred pulled up across the street. The car idled as they sat in silence for a long moment, steeling themselves. One wrong move, one indication that they were playing him, and Leon would kill them all.

"Alfred, if thing go bad-" Ivan started to say, but Alfred cut him off quickly. He didn't look at him, his eyes hard and distant as he stared a hole in the warehouse walls.

"Don't. Just don't. We did all of this last night." He said, not knowing if he could get out of the car if Ivan started now. He didn't need to be reminded that things could go tits up.

Ivan nodded and pursed his lips, saving the words for later. They got out of the car, quickly checking their weapons in the dark shadows of they alley. The wires hidden underneath their clothes had already been turned on, every sound broadcast to Elizaveta in a van a few blocks away. Ivan knew if he looked closely he would see their back up in the line for the club, discreetly keeping towards the back, or loitering around on corners and in cars for their signal.

Taking a deep breath and Alfred's hand, Ivan opened the door to the warehouse and slipped inside, his heart hammering in his throat. The lights were already on, stark light flooding the space. Leon looked on, bored, as he ordered his men around.

Seeing Ivan and Alfred, he smirked, barking an order at one of his men in Mandarin. The door to the van was flung open, and Matt and Natalia were pulled out, hands bound and heads covered with cloth sacks. A smaller black car yielded another prisoner, a woman Al had at first thought to be Emily. But her skin was loose on her arms, and her hands were too bony.

"Who is that?" He asked, looking to Ivan. He shook his head, frowning at the new variable.

Leon laughed and snatched the bag off of the woman's head, grabbing her harshly by the chin and forcing her to look up at them. Her watery blue eyes were bloodshot and full of tears, sunken into her lined, haggard face. She stared at him, eyes full of fear and something else he couldn't place.

"What? You don't recognize your own stepmother? Shame on you, Alfred." He tutted, releasing Stephanie's chin and letting her look away. She did, immediately, staring at the ground and refusing to look up.

Alfred blinked, staring at the strange woman in front of him. She was bone thin, with tired eyes and more wrinkles than her age would have given her. Still, when he looked past all of that, he saw it. He could almost see soft blonde hair and a pretty smile under the tangled dirty mess on her head and the jagged, broken mess of her mouth.

"Stephanie?" He asked, horrified. He wanted to run to her, he wanted to strangle her. He wanted her to explain, but he didn't want to hear a word she said. He looked at Matt again, and wondered if he knew. "What do you want with her? Let her go!" He demanded. "She has no part in this!"

"Oh, but I'm afraid she does." Leon said, looking like he wasn't afraid at all. "How do you think I got your brother?" He asked, smirking. "Mommy called and he came running. All I had to do was part with a little product now and then."

Alfred stared at her, his eyes wide and hurt as he processed what Leon had just said. Stephanie had sold Matt to Leon? For drugs? He looked at her again and saw it clearly. The scabs on her cheeks where she had been picking at them, the fucked up teeth, the glassy look in her eyes. He'd been a cop long enough to know a meth head when he saw one.

"Let them go." He demanded again. "We did what you wanted, now let them go." Leon chuckled and shook his head, drawing his gun from his belt and putting it to Stephanie's temple.

"Proof first, then the kids, then the bitch." He said, gesturing for one of his men to go grab the evidence from them. Ivan stared him down as he approached, grudgingly handing him the faked death photos and the finger from the morgue. He looked through them, his smile growing wider and more dangerous with every picture.

"Pleasure doing business with you, boys." He said, tucking the pictures into his pocket. "But you're serious of stupid if you think I'm letting you out of here."

The gunshot that shook the room seemed to stop time as well, as everyone froze. Stephanie's eyes were still wide in panic and for a moment he thought that, somehow, Leon had missed. But a full body shudder wracked through her and her eyes glazed over as she slumped against Leon.

It took Alfred a moment to realize the scream he heard had come from him. Leon had let her slump to the floor, a pool of blood quickly pooling around her head. He fell to his knees in shocked horror as he watched the puddle grow.

"You thought I was sloppy enough to let any of you walk out of here?" Leon asked, a bark of manic laughter echoing through the warehouse. "You're the last obstacle left, the last loose ends to be tied up. All the other pieces are off the board. Checkmate, boys " He raised his gun and advanced on Alfred, a hungry look in his eyes.

Alfred just stared at Stephanie, his unseeing eyes clouded with an ever-growing pool of red. He thought, vaguely, that he could hear Ivan yelling somewhere in the distance. But it was so far away, and he couldn't focus on anything but that thick, red blood.

"Alfred move!" Ivan shouted, charging at Alfred and tackling him to the ground as Leon shot the air where his head had been a moment before.

"Dammit, Alfred! Get it together!" Ivan said, shaking him. Alfred blinked the blood out of his eyes and looked owlishly up at Ivan. He tried to say something, but Ivan just growled and

grabbed his wrist, hauling to his feet and dragging him behind a pillar.

Ivan fired off a few shots around their cover while Alfred recovered. He fumbled with his gun, his fingers feeling thick and numb. He fired off a shot he was sure missed by a wide margin and ducked back again. He could feel the panic clawing at his chest and he tried to fight it, even as he began to shake.

"You can't hold me off forever." Leon taunted. "You'll run out of bullets soon enough." He was right, each of them only had one sidearm and one extra clip each. Ivan grinned as he heard something outside.

"Luckily, we won't have to wait forever!" Ivan said, taking a shot at Leon's suspicious face that went wide.

"What do you mean-" Leon started to say.

"Police! Freeze!" Arthur yelled through the door as his officers busted it down. Cops flooded into the warehouse, decked in full raid gear with weapons draw. For a moment, everyone did freeze. It was like a spell had been cast. But Leon recovered quickly, firing off a shot at Arthur that ricocheted off his helmet.

The spell shattered and the room burst into action, bullets flying in every direction. Drawing their weapons, Ivan and Alfred looked at each other and split up. Ivan slammed his elbow across a Dragon's cheek and took off towards Matt and Natalia as Alfred turned on Leon.

"You sick son of a bitch." Alfred said, his voice a dangerous rumbling growl. He trained his gun on Leon's head, the edges of his vision going red as the pool of blood around Stephanie's head seemed to seep in.

Leon laughed, his own gun settling its gaze between Alfred's eyes. "You know, I underestimated you. I thought for sure you'd be too stupid to go to your daddy. Maybe I just underestimated how dependent white boys are." He shrugged, smirking. "Well, would you look at the time. It seems I have places to be."

A contingent of bulky men in bullet proof vests converged around Leon, shielding him from the hell storm of bullets flying around them as they retreated towards the car. Another Dragon, just as imposing, blocked Alfred's way as he tried to give chase.

The man moved quickly for being so big, knocking Alfred's gun out of his hand and sensing him sprawling with one good punch. Alfred rubbed his jaw and jumped up, ducking under the man's next punch and staggering him with a jab to his throat. He stumbled back for a second, clutching at his neck, but Alfred didn't let up. He slammed his fist into his gut, winding him, and brought an elbow down hard on his head.

He didn't spare the man a glance as he leaped over him, covering his head and hoping for the best as he sprinted through the hail of gunfire towards the car Leon was being loaded into. He shot as he ran, catching one of the tires on his fourth shot and flattening it.

The look Leon gave him was one of pure hatred as he fired another shot at him before taking off through the back door, leaving his goons to the wave of cops that swooped down on them. Alfred busted through the door after him, seconds behind as Leon took off down another alley.

Ivan charged the nearest gangster, clocking him on the jaw and sending him reeling back. He used the opening to grab his wrist and twist his gun out of his hands and bring his arm behind his back. Zwingli threw him a pair of handcuffs and he quickly locked them around his wrists, shoving him out of the way and wading back into the fray. The gangsters were quickly being overwhelmed. They clearly hadn't expected back up, and many of them had been taken down before they could fire a single shot. But the remaining members of Leon's crew were fighting back hard.

Using the confusion as a cover, Matt leaned up against the van and maneuvered himself out of the hood over his head. He purposefully avoided looking at the still, prone figure of his mother on the floor. Movement caught his eye as Elizaveta disarmed one of the Dragons, his knife sliding across the ground within easy reach. He dropped to the ground, scooting across the floor and grabbing the knife. He flipped it up and started sawing at the nylon rope around his hands. When it was weak enough, he jerked his hands apart and snapped it,.

He placed a gentle hand on Natalia's shoulder to let her know it was okay and pulled the bag off of her head. She shook, silent and bloodless, as she took in the fight. Her eyes stopped on Stephanie, widening in fear and disbelief.

"Don't look." He said, sawing through her bonds and dragging her behind the van where hopefully it would be safer. She averted her eyes quickly, tears welling up in them and threatening to spill over. Wiping her tears, he pulled her tight to him, putting himself between her and the van to shield her from any bullets that might go through.

"It's going to be okay." He told her, shushing her gently and petting her hair. It was unconvincing, even he knew that. His voice was shaking, and he was too, and he was sure he could hear the panic clawing at his throat.

"Maybe for them. But your day just got a lot worse." Chen said, leveling a gun at Matthew's head. "You two are coming with me." Matt cried out in pain as Chen grabbed his arm and yanked.

"Leave him alone!" Natasha screamed, kicking him hard between the legs. Chen shrieked, dropping Matt's arm and his gun.

"You little bitch!" Chen wheezed, lunging for the girl. He caught her by her long hair, dragging her up by it until she was dangling in the air. She screamed in agony, her scalp a million points of pain. "I'm going to kill you!" He pulled a knife out of his belt, holding it to her throat.

Matt dove for the gun Chen had dropped, pointing it at him. "Put her down!" He said, firm and commanding. He thanked Al and Arthur for forcing twice a month shooting practice on him as he held the gun steady, staring down the barrel with hard eyes.

Natasha cried out as she was dropped, landing hard on the floor. Matthew flicked his eyes over to her to check that she was okay. She winced as she gingerly ran her hands over her scalp, but she seemed to be fine. Turning back to Chen, he nodded his head at the van. "Against the hood, drop the knife and keep your hands where I can see them." He said. Chen complied, and Natasha scrambled to pick up the knife.

Ivan and Arthur got to them at the same time, rushing at their siblings with wild eyes. Arthur slipped between his brother and the man who had attacked them, slapping a pair of cuffs on him and handing him over to another officer. Ivan scooped Natasha up and cradled her to his chest, murmuring to her in soft Russian.

Outside, Alfred dogged Leon's every step, never giving him enough space to lose him, always there the second before he turned the corner. Leon fired a few shots from around a corner, hoping to shake him off, but Alfred returned fire and closed the distance between them further. Leon cursed and took off, winding his way through the back streets and byways but never managing to lose his tail.

Finally, they hit a dead end.

"End of the line, Chun." Alfred said, cornering him.

"For you, maybe." Leon said, grinning sharply as he pointed his gun back at Alfred. "You're the only thing standing between me and what I want, Jones. That's not a great place to be. Just ask Yao Wang." He smirked. "You'll see him soon enough." He cocked his pistol and trained on Alfred's head as the universe condensed into a single second.

Alfred reacted in less than a blink, shooting Leon's gun out of his hand.

A string of curse words in English with some Cantonese came pouring out of his mouth as Leon cradled his hand, screaming. His thumb was a mess of bloody meat, blown apart by the bullet. Alfred tackled him, wrenching his bad arm behind his back and forcing a knee into his back to keep him down. He kept the hand as high above Leon's heart as he could, tearing off a strip of his undershirt and wrapping it tightly around the wound.

"You fucking shot my thumb off!" Leon screamed, struggling against him. "I'll fucking kill you!" Alfred scoffed and dug his knee into his back.

"You're seriously stupid if you think I'm letting you up." He taunted. "Besides, someone needs to keep pressure on this hand." Leon screeched something incoherent and went slack, panting from pain and effort.

"I have Chun." He said into the wire. "An alleyway a few blocks South, I'll need medical." He waited for the affirmative in his ear piece and sat back, sighing heavily as he allowed himself to relax, just a little bit.

"All wrapped up in here. Medic's on their way." Came Arthur's reply. Al let out a shaky, relieved breath. Matt was safe.

Al was at Matt's side two seconds after he came through the door, having rushed back the moment a medic had taken Leon off of his hands. He threw himself bodily at his brothers, catching them both in a bone-crushing hug. They clung to each other for a moment, Alfred babbling out nonsensical apologies as Matt tried to assure him that it was okay.

"This is all my fault!" Alfred rasped, close to tears as he checked Matt over for injuries.

"Al, don't be ridiculous. It's not your fault." Matt insisted, rubbing his brother's back soothingly. "You came and rescued me, right? That's what counts."

Al shook his head emphatically. "No! What counts is not putting you in danger in the first place!" He protested, stomping his foot like an overgrown child.

"Look, Al, we could play the blame game all year. Your fault, my fault....m-mom's fault. It doesn't matter. Let's just say it's that guy's fault and call it a day, eh?" He asked, tiredly gesturing to where Leon was being attended to.

Al looked like he wanted to argue, but he just caught Matt up in another hug. "No more getting kidnapped, okay?" He said, giving a watery laugh.

"No more getting blackmailed into becoming a murderer." Matt shot back, a faltering, tired grin on his face.

"I want to go home!" Natasha screeched, interrupting the moment. Red in the face and coming to the end of a long, tiring day, Natalia looked like she was about to throw a colossal fit. Not that anyone could blame her. If Alfred was young enough to get away with melting down, he probably would

"It'll be okay, Natashenka." He promised. "Everything is okay now. You're safe." He rocked her gently, rubbing her back and holding her tight. He let her cry into his neck, shushing her and wiping her face.

"I wanna go home!" She sobbed, clinging to him like a lifeline. "I want Katyusha." He shushed her and pet her hair, setting her on his hip.

"Okay." He said, pressing a kiss to her cheek. "We'll go home. Just as soon as I finish up a few things here, okay?" Natasha shook her head, tears starting up again as she wailed for her big sister.

"I think paperwork can wait, Braginsky." Arthur said, dismissing him. "You too, Jones. I want both of you to go home. Be with your families. Rest. I'll take your statements in the morning."

"Come by when you're done." Alfred said, glad to be let off for the night. He was exhausted in every sense, and he just wanted to sleep in his own bed. "Wake me up if I'm asleep. I mean it."

"I'll be there as soon as I can." He said, turning back to the clean up. Ivan had already left with his sister, no doubt eager to get her to bed. He turned to leave as well, but then stopped.

"Hey, what about Mei Li?" He asked, frowning.

"She was implicated in the Interpol case. I'm not at will to discuss anything more than that" Arthur said. Suddenly it clicked what Henry had meant when he said Mei was busy, and he laughed.

"Well damn, I guess our work here is done!" He said, grinning and throwing his arm over Matt's shoulders. "What do you say we go to my place, call up Em and Francis, and I'll make us my super special cherry chocolate cobbler?"

"I say that if you don't save me some, I'll finish where Chun left off, tosser." Arthur said, smirking and waving them off as the two youngest brothers left. They were laughing, but both leaned heavily against the other, and neither of them could bring themselves to look at the woman under the white sheet.

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At 6 am, when Ivan knocked on his door, Alfred was still awake. There was too much for him to process not to be. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw the pool of blood growing, and growing. So it was a welcome distraction when he showed up with flowers, of all things, and a casserole dish.

"I hope I didn't wake you." He said, smiling shyly and offering him the flowers. "Katya may have gone overboard when I brought Natasha home. We have too much, and...I couldn't sleep." Alfred stepped took the flowers and let him in.

"I can't sleep either." He said, filling up a tall water bottle and sticking the flowers in. "I have some cobbler left if you want some." Ivan shook his head and put the casserole dish on the table, pulling Alfred into his arms.

"Can I sleep here?" He asked, muttering his question into Alfred's hair and breathing in deeply, seeming to relax a bit. Alfred wrapped his arms around Ivan's waist and nodded, burying his face in his neck.

"Let's go to bed." He said, taking Ivan's hand and leading him into the bedroom, the casserole forgotten on the table.

They curled up together, Alfred's back flush against Ivan's chest. Warmth radiated between them, and Ivan's arms were a comforting weight around his waist. His breath puffed gently against the back of his neck and Al smiled, lacing their fingers together and drawing Ivan's arm over himself. When he closed his eyes, all he saw was darkness.

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Despite everything, they still gave her a funeral. It was small, just them and Emily and Ivan. Her parents couldn't travel, and they had no idea if she had any real friends or how to find them. Apparently no one had seen the obituary or the news report, because no one came. There were no eulogies, there were no tears, there were no slideshows of her life. Just tired eyes staring down at an open casket.

The burial was cold, the wind biting and the people silent as the priest prayed over her. Alfred's hand in Matthew's was the only indication that anyone there felt anything as Stephanie Mary Williams was lowered into the earth and laid to rest. Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust.

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"Are you sure you want to do this, Alfred?" Arthur asked, frowning at the paper in his hand.

"Yeah, I'm sure." He said, gaze firm and shoulders set. If he was going to get resistance anywhere, it would be from Arthur. And for a second, he thought he would get it as Arthur puffed up, scowling. But the air went out of him in a huff, his shoulders slumping.

"If this is about Braginsky, you can just transfer." He offered.

"I already considered that, Art. But the thing is....I just don't want to be a cop anymore." He sighed, curling in on himself slightly. "I don't want to carry a gun anymore. I don't want to run around chasing criminals. And I need help, man. I need to be seeing a shrink, not carrying a loaded gun." He laughed bitterly. "I've been thinking about this for a while. Before all of this, even. This is my final decision."

Arthur sighed and placed the paper on the desk, grabbing his pen and putting it to the line. He paused, looking back up at Alfred. "If you're sure..." He said, and Alfred nodded. He signed the resignation and placed the pen on the table with a soft click of finality.

"Thank you." Alfred said, squeezing his brother's hand and leaving him to his inevitable mood. He had better things to do than entertain Arthur's tiff.

"Are you ready to go?" Ivan asked. "I just clocked out."

Grinning, Alfred grabbed Ivan's hand and laced their fingers together. Ivan grinned back and bent down to kiss him, squeezing his hand. "I'm ready when you are." Alfred said.

"Our first date." Ivan remarked, trying to sound nonchalant and not quite getting it.

"Second date, you're forgetting that time we beat a guy up together." Alfred said brightly.

"That was not a date." Ivan said, laughing.

"I'm counting it." Alfred said, dragging Ivan out of the precinct.

"Fine." Ivan said, rolling his eyes fondly. "Our second first date."

"I like that." Alfred said, gazing up at Ivan softly. "Our second first date."

Ivan looked down at the galaxies inside of Alfred's eyes. He thought if he looked hard enough, he could see stars being born in their depths. He could get used to this kind of stargazing.

"What are you looking at?" Alfred asked, voice hushed.

"You." Ivan answered, sweeping him up into a kiss. Alfred melted into it, winding his arms around Ivan's neck. When they pulled away, Al flashed him a cat's content grin.

"Well, considering your track record, I'm gonna let that pass as a smooth line. So how about we see about that candlelight? I got us reservations somewhere nice." He said, puffing up like he had done more than just call in. Ivan chuckled and took his hand.

"With you, I'd go anywhere." He said, kissing his knuckles.

"Oh Jesus Christ!" Alfred swore, rolling his eyes and dropping Ivan's hand like a hot poker. "You're lucky I like you."

"Yeah," Ivan smiled, taking Alfred's hand again and pulling him close. "Yeah, I am."

Chapter End Notes

I honestly don't know what to say. I mean, what can I say? This is an end something like 6 or 7 years in the making. I have had so many ups and downs with this fic I feel like I've spent over half a decade on a trampoline. Things between me and this work have become so complicated that I don't know how to even feel. Relieved to be done with it? Proud I finished? Lost because a huge chapter of my life is starting to close?

I guess I can only post this and step away. The story isn't about me anymore. My part is done. It's yours now.

To my old readers, thank you for going on this journey with me. To my new readers, I'm sorry I couldn't commit to a full rewrite. To my beta, I'm sorry you had to read my awful first drafts of these last 4 chapters.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!